



SLAYERS

3

THE GHOSTS OF SAIRAAG

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1: Attack on Sight!

The afternoon sunlight glinted off of naked blades and clanging silver armor. My companion Gourry and I shared a deep sigh at the sight: just under a dozen fully-armed warriors blocking our path ahead.

“We’ve tracked you down at last, evildoers!” their leader proclaimed, pointing straight at us.

Hoo boy... This was the fifth band of wannabe heroes come to “vanquish” us today.

“Heed me, abominable criminals Lina Inverse and Gourry Gabriev! Your heinous legacies come to an end forthwith!”

Yeah, yeah. Whatever, man... With my cape fluttering in the wind, I let the wannabe hero’s words go in one ear and out the other. These guys had already pegged us as history’s worst villains or whatever, so I knew there was no point in arguing with him.

In case you’re wondering, this mess all started a few days ago.

I woke up to find myself captured. “Yep, pretty much your standard abduction scenario” was the first thought my fuzzy head could manage. My hands and legs were thoroughly bound, and my captors had made sure to gag me too. The cool floor felt kinda nice against my cheek, but the smell of mildew grossed me out more.

I seemed to be in a storehouse of some kind. I looked toward the door and saw two men in front of it, presumably guards. They were standing bolt upright but holding bludgeoning weapons of some kind—a pretty silly look, if you ask me.

“You up, Lina?”

When I heard my name, I looked around again to find another man lying nearby. Like me, he was bound up tight and had been stripped of his sword. The only difference seemed to be that he wasn't gagged.

Reader, meet Gourry: blond, handsome, unassuming. He was also a master swordsman, but he probably had less brain activity than your average zombie. Ha, good one, Lina! (Okay, maybe that was going a *little* far...) Anyhoo, it looked like Gourry had been captured too and—

Wait, captured?!

Guh! Stupid Lina! This is no time for leisurely scene-setting!

"Mmmrmph! Hrmrgh!"

I struggled in a panic, but they'd tied me up good. The best I could manage was flailing and wriggling like an energetic caterpillar.

"Ah, sounds like the girl's awake too," said Guard A.

"Y-Yeah," Guard B replied, a slight tremble in his voice. He cast a nervous glance my way. "But... she doesn't look too dangerous to me."

"That's what makes her so scary. She looks all innocent so you let your guard down, and then... You catch my drift?" Guard A said knowingly, even though it was nonsense.

Guard B nodded somberly.

"Hey, guys," a voice interrupted, sending a comical jolt through the guards. They looked toward the speaker—Gourry—in a panic. "Would you mind telling us what's going on here?"

He asked so casually that it was hard to tell if he had any real appreciation for the gravity of the situation. The guards simply stared at him, their eyes full of trepidation. At last, Guard A broke the silence.

"H-Hey! Don't play dumb with us, or else! You catch my drift?!"

More nonsense...

"C'mon, d-don't waste your time with scum like him,"

Guard B scolded.

"Yeah, you're right.."

At that, Guard A went quiet again. If I could've spoken up myself, I might've been able to wheedle some good info out of them, but...

"Now..." Guard A said, his eyes falling on me.

W-Wait a minute! Don't look at me like some perv! Is this really how it's gotta be?!

"As for the girl, it'd be kind of a waste to *just* hand her to the authorities, wouldn't it?"

Yup, here we go again! I know I'm as lovely as the day is long and all that, so I can understand that I stir certain urges in most men. But this is seriously getting old...

And wait! The authorities?! Hang on! I know I've been called Bandit Killer and the Queen of the Dead, but only by the villains deserving of my wrath! What could the authorities want with little ol' me?!

Wait a minute. Could it be... Gourry?!

Had Mr. Unassuming here had a bounty taken out on him at some point? Come to think of it, we'd only been traveling together a few months. He rarely talked about himself, so I had no idea what kind of life he'd led before we met.

Really, it wouldn't be that surprising if he had some kind of a past. Yeah, surely this was all Gourry's fault! Yeah, yeah... That had to be it. Made perfect sense to me!

I knowingly looked over at Gourry... only to find him eyeballing *me*! "What did you do this time?" his gaze seemed to say.

Grr... Don't you look at me like that!

Unfortunately, my gag kept me from giving him a piece of my mind. One thing this little farce made clear, however, was that Gourry was every bit as clueless as I was about our current predicament.

"A w-waste? You mean..." Guard B breathed, staring into the middle distance as he tried to grasp Guard A's meaning.

"They're just gonna hang her or something once we turn

her over. Who's gonna complain if I have a little fun with her first?"

Gee, I dunno, bro! Maybe me?!

These dolts had clearly mistaken us for dangerous criminals, and I wasn't exactly gonna accept a measly "Oh, sorry about all the groping!" once the misunderstanding came to light.

"M-Maybe you shouldn't," Guard B fretted.

He was clearly concerned out of fear rather than the goodness of his heart, but if he could get his friend to lay off, then I wasn't going to hold it against him. Rah, rah, B! Keep it up, B! You tell that nasty ol' Guard A!

"Don't be a wimp. Just stay back and keep watch. If anything happens to me, you come bash her damned head in."

"O... Okay..."

Agh! No, don't fold! Stand up for yourself, man! Be strong!

"Anyway, it's not like I'm gonna untie her or ungag her. I'm just gonna strip her down a little. No big deal, right?"

"I... I guess not. In that case... maybe I'll join you..."

Whoa, hang on there, fellas! Don't *both* of you go giving me those lecherous grins! Hey! Stay back, dammit!

Easily holding me down as I struggled, Guard A cupped my chin in his hand. I might have speed and skill on my side, but I tend to lose out in terms of sheer strength. Obviously, as a brilliant swordsman-slash-sorcerer, I could take care of this with a little magic... except the gag in my mouth made that impossible.

"No hard feelings, okay? I bet you've done a lot worse than this..."

Have not! Have not!

"Now... Shall we?"

The man slowly reached out, and then...

"Stop."

Oh, sweet salvation! That was Gourry's voice! The two

guards, intimidated by the aura he was now projecting, unwittingly recoiled.

"Don't touch her. If you do..." he said, glaring at the two guards with violence in his eyes that would send an ogre running.

If... If Gourry could intimidate these guys into backing off, I'd be saved. But if not... Well, let's just say I didn't have the utmost faith that Gourry could talk them down.

A tense silence hung in the air for a time.

"Ha!" Guard A scoffed, dashing the last of my hopes.

Alas, poor Lina Inverse! Would she be subject to the men's abuses after all?! Er, this was no time to get swept up in cliched narrative conventions! This was seriously bad news!

"You don't s-scare me!" Guard A declared.

Your voice is trembling, dumbass!

"You can't do squat all tied up like that. But I'll humor you, so go on... What's gonna happen if I put my hands on her, huh?"

"I'm going to say it again: Do. Not. Touch. Her. If you do..."

"If I do?"

Gourry answered him in a quiet, clear voice: "You'll catch what she's got."

Chk!

I could hear the air in the room turn subzero. After a very long pause, the two men, frozen in place, turned their eyes on me...

Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle!

...And scooted back in a hurry. If I hadn't been gagged, my jaw would've hit the floor.

"Come to think of it..." A strained smile appeared on Guard A's face as he turned creakingly toward Guard B again. "Y-You might be right. It's not nice to touch people without their permission."

"Yeah... everyone knows that."

They shared a hoarse laugh and then stared at each other

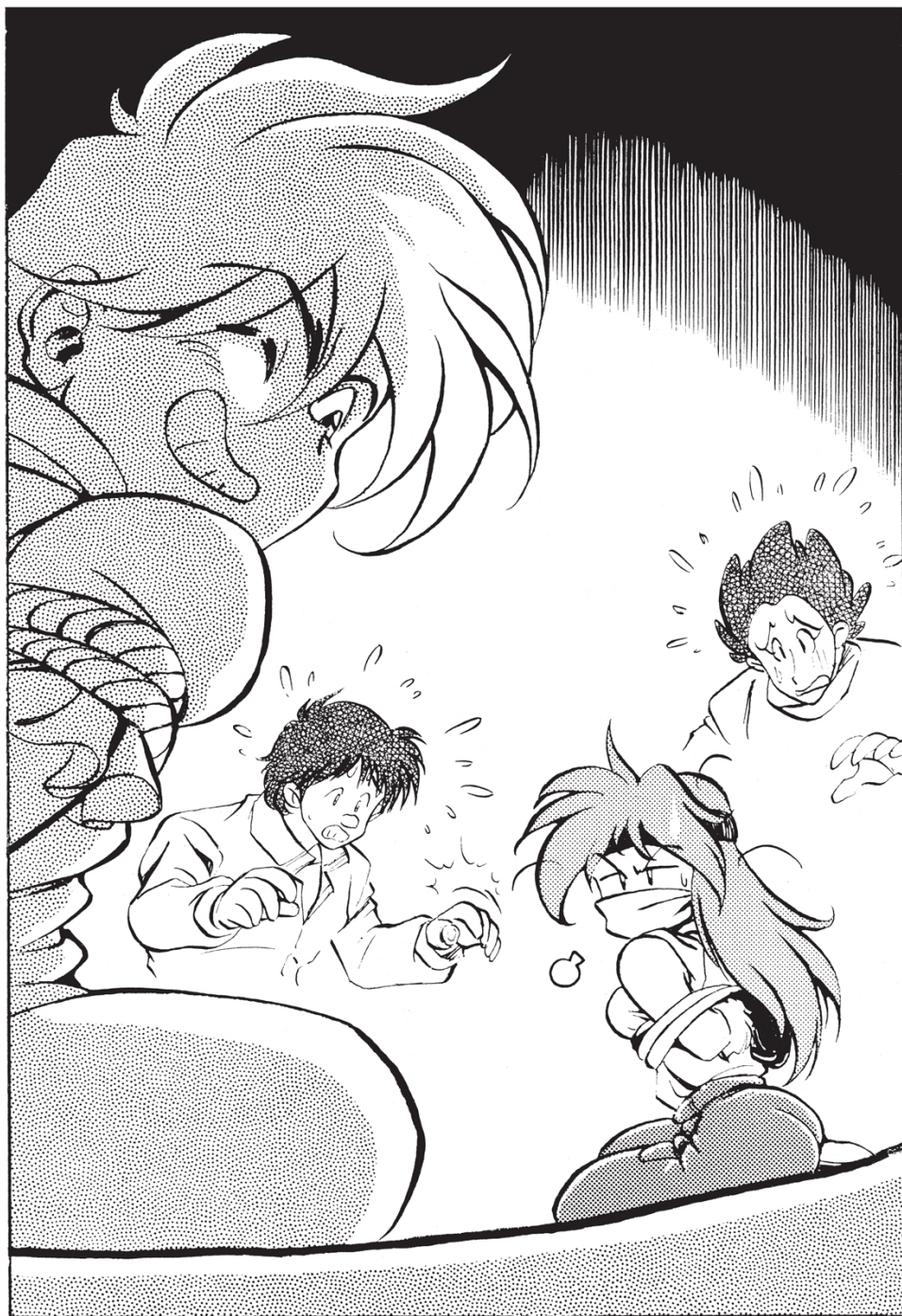
for some time before letting out a big sigh.

“Say, why don’t we stand watch outside?”

“Y-Yeah... She might be contagious even from here.”

Hey!

With that, the two guards left through the door, casting sidelong glances at me as they made their exit.



"Whew. Looks like they're gone now, Lina," Gourry said.

Shing! I turned a glare set to kill in his direction, then silently began wriggling my way over to him. His lips drew into an awkward smile.

"L-Look, it was the best thing I could think of..."

Wriggle... Wriggle...

"What matters is you're safe and— Hey, wait! Lina!"

Wham!

I planted a double-footed kick square into Gourry's face.

"So, what exactly did I do to deserve being kicked like that?" Gourry griped as he pulled my gag off with his teeth.

"Blugh! Seriously?! You couldn't've thought up a better excuse?! You made it sound like I'm... *grumble, grumble.*"

"What else was I supposed to do? Just sit back and let them feel you up?"

"Erk... Well..." I faltered, unable to come up with a reply.

"See?"

"Okay, fine! You have a point! But... hmph! I'll accept that I was in the wrong just this once!" I conceded in an honest apology—a rarity for me.

"Gosh, who brought you up to be this way?"

"You shut your mouth! Now... we need to figure ourselves a way out of this jam. Granted, that should be easy enough with magic back on the table."

And so I set to chanting a spell. Obviously I didn't want the guards outside overhearing, so I kept my voice in the same hushed whisper I'd been using to talk to Gourry.

"Bram Fang!"

This was a spell that fired a cutting arrow of wind, but it wasn't very powerful. It was only enough to produce a light scratch, and not even that if your opponent was wearing so much as leather armor. I'd learned it from a sorcerer lady I'd met in a town once as a way to drive off gropers, but that was about all it was good for... although you could also focus several of them in one spot to cut through rope.

Once Gourry was free, I got him to untie me too.

"I guess we'd better find our swords next, huh?" he asked as he worked out his stiff shoulder.

"Yeah," I replied, shaking out my cape as I got to my feet. "And an explanation, while we're at it."

The sun had dipped below the mountains by the time we'd first arrived in town. The locals regarded us with suspicion, but we didn't pay them much mind. The route we were taking, the Falcon Road, had only been extended through the area about five years ago, and a small, isolated village wasn't going to go from pegging all outsiders as thieves to welcoming them just like that. Figuring we'd be fine as long as we were out of town at dawn, I'd gotten Gourry and myself rooms at the inn, but...

After a few bites of dinner, I found myself hit by a wave of sleepiness. And the next thing I knew, we were tied up in a warehouse.

"Now, why don't you tell us exactly what's going on here? Oh, and no screaming, okay? One peep out of you and I swear..." I threatened, glaring right into the eyes of the man Gourry had pinioned.

"Eeeek! P-Please spare me! Don't kill me! I'm begging you!" wailed Guard A like a baby.

Guard B was already collapsed in the doorway. It had only taken Gourry one poke in the back of the neck to knock the guy unconscious once we stepped outside.

"Hey, no need to be scared," he said in the tones of a soothing parent as he held Guard A fast from behind. "Your buddy isn't dead or anything. He's just sleeping."

It was presently the middle of the night, so our only light came from the stars and the sliver-thin moon above. As I'd expected, we were being kept in an old storehouse on the outskirts of town. The village was likely fast asleep by now, as there wasn't a single light on in the distance. All I could see were the faint silhouettes of rooftops in the dark.

Unsurprisingly, there was no sign of anyone else around.

“So spill it. Why did you capture us?”

“B-Because of the bounty on your heads, of course!”

“What?!”

Gourry and I looked at each other.

“I’m sure this is just a case of mistaken identity. I’m Lina Inverse, and he’s...”

“G-Gourry Gabriev, right?”

Gourry and I exchanged another look. Either there were some wily evildoers out there who’d stolen our identities, or someone had put a bounty on our heads in bad faith... Either way, we were gonna have to do something about it.

“Who put the bounty out on us?”

“D-Dunno... There are wanted posters going around promising good money for bringing you in alive...”

Alive, huh? That made things even more strange. Who could possibly want to capture me and Gourry *alive*? I figured Guard A wouldn’t know anything about that, however, so I decided to focus on more pressing matters.

“Now, where’d you put our swords?”

“They’re... in the mayor’s house... I think...” he said hesitantly.

I figured he was telling the truth, though. He seemed too frightened to do otherwise.

“And where’s the mayor’s house?” I asked.

Once again, he answered readily. If we really were villains, he’d be putting the mayor in serious danger by ratting like that, but he was solely concerned with his own survival at the moment. He seemed like your typical bully—acts tough when they have the upper hand, but crumples quickly when the tables turn.

“Hmm, I think I get the picture. C’mon, Gourry.”

“Okay.”

Gourry released the man, then poked him lightly in the back of the neck. That was all it took to knock him out cold. We then left the two sleeping guards to nap under the starry

sky as we headed for the mayor's house.

"Keep quiet."

"No loud noises, okay?"

The old man didn't seem especially surprised by our sudden visit. He merely sat up in bed and looked at us in the dim lamplight.

"Oh, it's you two..." he said as though he'd been expecting us. His casual attitude caught me off-guard.

"Do... you think we could get our swords back, perhaps?" I found myself asking politely.

"The top shelf over there," the old man said with a ready nod. "Help yourselves."

Gourry reached for the shelf he indicated in search of our objective. (I wasn't tall enough.)

"Why are you being so cooperative?" I couldn't help asking.

"It was I who told the innkeeper to drug you, I confess. But when I caught sight of you sleeping, it seemed to me that there might have been some kind of mistake."

You think?!

"You just didn't look like villains to me. Of course, there are wicked ones in this world who don't look the part, but they still tend to have a certain air about them... An air that you two do not possess."

"And it didn't occur to you to tell your flunkies this?"

The old man forlornly shook his head, then turned to Gourry.

"Young man, that shelf holding your swords... there's a drawer at the very bottom. Yes, that one. Bring me the paper in there, would you?"

Gourry did as he was asked and handed the paper to the old man, who held it up to the lamp so we could see it... and when we did, we gasped.

"This is..."

It was a wanted poster, and two of the three faces on it

were clearly ours. Beneath each of them was an absolutely absurd sum of money. Not even a renegade king-killer would fetch a bounty like that.

And those portraits... They were drawn with bloodthirsty, murderous expressions, but they were unmistakably me and Gourry. They were even labeled with our names.

But what surprised me most of all was the third wanted man on the poster. There was only one incident all three of us had been involved in together. Could it be...?

"H-Hey, Lina. This guy here," Gourry called, pointing to the third face. "Do we even know him?"

Argh! I felt my whole body go limp.

"You stupid... How could you forget someone that memorable?!"

"It was the bounty," the elder sighed. "We could easily make it through the coming winter with money like that. The people were so happy... How was I to tell them, 'I don't think this is right. We should release them'?"

For that, I had no answer.

"As another matter, the man who sponsored the bounty isn't the type to make false claims... I've never met him personally, but his upstanding reputation precedes him."

"You know who put the bounty on our heads?!" I asked, impassioned.

"I'm sure you know of him too," the mayor replied with a firm nod. "The modern-day saint... The wandering holy man Rezo the Red Priest. Do you know what he would want with you?"

Okay, this was going to take some explaining... No, scratch that. If I actually explained our history with Rezo, it would just sound like a tall tale. If someone else told it to me, I sure as heck wouldn't buy it.

If I boiled it down to the more believable bits, then it would go something like this: Two months ago, right around the time I first met Gourry, I ended up in possession of a certain item. There was another group who wanted this item,

however, so we ended up clashing over it. Said group included the so-called saint, Rezo the Red Priest, and a spellword named Zelgadis in his employ.

Zelgadis was the third person on the poster.

After some back-and-forth between our groups, Zelgadis turned on Rezo, but the item in question nevertheless fell into Rezo's hands. The Red Priest then underwent a wicked transformation, and Gourry, Zelgadis, and I worked together to finally defeat him.

In other words, Rezo should be gone now.

"Sir Mayor, the offer on that poster must be null and void," I said. "I may be mistaken... but I heard that the Red Priest died two months ago."

I left out the part about how we'd actually killed him, as that would only complicate things. Nevertheless, the mayor looked at me suspiciously.

"Curious, but I do believe you're mistaken. The authorities only brought these posters to us last week. They said that they were issued about half a month ago."

Half a month ago? That couldn't be possible. Gourry and I looked at each other again.

"Th-Then, Sir Mayor... would you happen to know where the Red Priest is at this particular time?"

"I'm afraid not," he said with a slow shake of his head. "But if you two are truly innocent, you should head for the town of Crimson to the west. It's where the poster says the bounty is to be paid, so you might learn more there. Perhaps you can even speak to the Red Priest and clear up this confusion yourselves."

This was way worse than just a simple case of confusion, but I nodded dutifully anyway.

"Misunderstandings... truly beget nothing but sorrow," the mayor said with a long sigh and a distant gaze.

I couldn't help but wonder what kind of complicated past he himself had.

"Thank you, sir," Gourry said quietly. It mystified me how

normal he could act at times like this. "I'm sure we'll only cause trouble if we linger here too long, so we'll be taking our leave now."

"Of course," the old man said with a small nod.

And so Gourry and I put the sleepy town behind us.

"What do you think is really going on, Gourry?"

It was the next day now, somewhere around noon. We'd made camp that night after slipping out of town. We'd enjoyed a late breakfast, and were now on the road to Crimson.

"You mean about Red Priest Rezo being alive?"

I nodded firmly.

"I feel like there're a few possibilities," he said, folding his arms as he walked. I kept a little ways behind him to the side, waiting for him to elaborate.

The cobblestone road stretched out before us. Green mountains rose in the distance. The grassy field swayed in the wind. Songbirds twittered all around.

Hang on a minute...

"Gourry, was that actually all you had to say?"

He scratched his head, a shy smile on his face.

"Heh..."

Don't "heh" me!

"Darn it... You gotta work those brain muscles of yours and actually *think* for once, or your whole head's just gonna turn to tartar sauce!"

"What the heck is tartar sauce?"

"Anyway, there are indeed a couple of possibilities. The first is that this 'Rezo' is a phony. Given that the bounty is for the three of us, it's most likely the handiwork of one his subordinates trying to avenge Rezo... Though in reality, I doubt this is an actual revenge plot so much as it is a 'make-a-name-by-killing-his-killers' plot. That's why they want us brought to them alive.

"The next most likely possibility is that this is all simply a

case of bad timing. When I bolted with Zelgadis, we were on the run for a couple of days before we met back up with you. It's possible that, during that time, Rezo asked one of his men to put out a bounty on us. Maybe there was some sort of a delay and the posters have just come out now. Though if that were the case, there was no reason for him to specify that he wanted us alive..."

"There's one other possibility," Gourry said, his expression grave.

I found myself scowling. I knew what he meant, and I wasn't thrilled at the prospect. I turned my gaze upward to the heavens.

"Rezo the Red Priest might really be alive. And if he is..." I whispered to the cloudless blue sky, "I can't beat him this time."

If only that grim speculation could have been the capper to our day... But alas, there's always more crap to deal with. The wannabe heros lining up to "vanquish us" had been increasing in number ever since our capture. We were six days out from Crimson, and if the local do-gooder brigades kept proliferating at this rate, we'd be dealing with about three hundred of them a day by the time we got there.

Well, okay, that was pretty implausible. But still, they were getting annoying as hell. Is this how it felt to be a dark lord? This endless cavalcade of fully-armed warriors coming at you out of nowhere, following the same corny old script? Just like the guys we were dealing with now...

"We are the Eight Silver Knights of the Principality of Lenos, ordained by heaven..."

If they were just some random baddies, this would be where I slammed 'em with a spell and kept walking. But things were a bit more complicated here, seeing as these guys thought *we* were the baddies. I mean, I was still going to put them in their place, but I'd at least show a little mercy, you know?

Rather than murdered, they might just end up crippled or maimed. Listen, I'm not great at this whole mercy thing, okay? Don't laugh! Where I'm from, they say, "Even when you hold back, hit like you mean it." That's right. I grew up with a bunch of huge badasses. My big sister, for example. Boy, she might be quieter than me, but she... No, I won't say it. If it ever got back to her, I'd be dead.

"...Our story begins ten years ago..."

I cast a glance over at the knights, who *still* weren't done with their introduction. I quietly incanted a spell, and...

"Bomb Splid!"

Ba-ba-boosh!

"Gyaaah!"

My very merciful strike—if I do say so myself—sent the seven knights flying. Huh? There were eight, you say? Look, does it even matter at this point?

"You know, Lina... sometimes I wonder if you even know what 'mercy' means," Gourry grumbled, looking slightly disgusted.

"Of course I know what it means! If I hadn't shown any mercy just now, those seven knights... or was it eight? Whatever! They would've been blasted to bits, armor and all!"

"I suppose they *are* alive at least, but..."

There, Gourry cast a piteous look over the scattered knights, who were lying on the ground twitching and groaning to themselves.

"Ahh... is this the end?"

"W-We should've just gone after those bandits instead..."

"Hang in there, men... Don't die on me..."

Okay, yeah, so I might have overdone it.

"Explain to me how this is any different from the way you normally treat bad guys again, please?" Gourry asked wearily.

I clicked my tongue, waggled my finger at him, and proclaimed, "I used a different spell."

He let out a big sigh.

It was a quiet night. I was tossing in bed, unable to sleep. Despite our wanted status, large enough towns always had plenty of inns willing to take us in for the right price.

But something was stirring deep in my chest. I'd felt it more and more lately whenever I ended up alone at the end of the day.

I'd been having a lot of sleepless nights these days, and I knew just what was causing it. I was thinking of Gourry in the room next to mine.

Things had been like this since the day I first met him. Was he awake right now? Every time the thought ran through my mind, the pain in my chest grew stronger.

Hahh...

I gave up on sleeping and crept out of bed. I moved over to the thin wall that separated our rooms and pressed a hand to it, then my cheek. I couldn't hear the slow, measured breaths of him slumbering... Did that mean he was still awake after all? If so, then...

"Sleeping!"

I sent a spell through the wall! Come dragon roar or banshee wail, *nothing* would wake him up tonight!

Okay! I grinned and started making my preparations.

I donned my white robe and black pants, tied my bandanna around my forehead, and slipped on my boots and long, black gloves. A night-black cape hung from my shaved-down great turtle shell pauldrons, and a shortsword from my belt.

Locked! And! Loaded! Mwahaha... mwahahahaha...

A big smile spread across my face. That's right! Why deny myself? Ever since I met Gourry, I'd been too worried about his judgment to engage in my usual bandit bullying, which had left me with a major case of blue balls.

It was especially bad tonight. The knights I'd zapped this morning had mentioned something about bandits, and it

was all people could talk about at the restaurant once Gourry and I got to town... Now I couldn't help myself. I was *aching* for action.

Thus I slipped out of the inn unseen and headed off toward my destination. I could already imagine the location of the bandits' base courtesy of the rumors I'd overheard at the inn. Only an idiot wouldn't have been able to find it.

The forest was silent at this hour. I followed a vague path that looked a bit like an animal trail, cutting through the underbrush as I ran.

I was dead on. This was definitely the right way.

Near some dilapidated ruins, I could see a red and orange fire burning—a bandit bonfire. Several men were lazing around it, looking bored as they occasionally took swigs of booze and laughed at nothing in particular. Each one carried a scimitar and was dressed in a black tunic.

I had to wonder. Why do these guys never showcase any originality in their wardrobe? Not that I really care, but... would it hurt them to at least *try*?

The ones by the fire were probably lookouts, with the real base hidden in the ruins behind them. It looked like it'd be pretty easy to force my way in, but a too-powerful attack spell could knock down the whole shebang and bury whatever treasure was inside.

So if I didn't want to ruin the whole point of this trip... first things first, I'd have to lure everyone out into the open. I took off my swordbelt and pauldrons, and rolled them up in my cape. Carefully cradling the bundle in my arms, I walked a little ways back down the path. Then I took in a deep breath, and...

"Help!" I shouted as I broke into a run.

The bandits quickly came to see what was going on. I ran right up to them and made a big show of tripping. Of course, I kept my cape bundle clutched close.

"Help... *gasp* ...Help!"

Breathing heavily (acting, of course!), I clung to the nearest bandit. They all seemed confused by my sudden arrival.

“H-Hey, what’s this all about?” one asked.

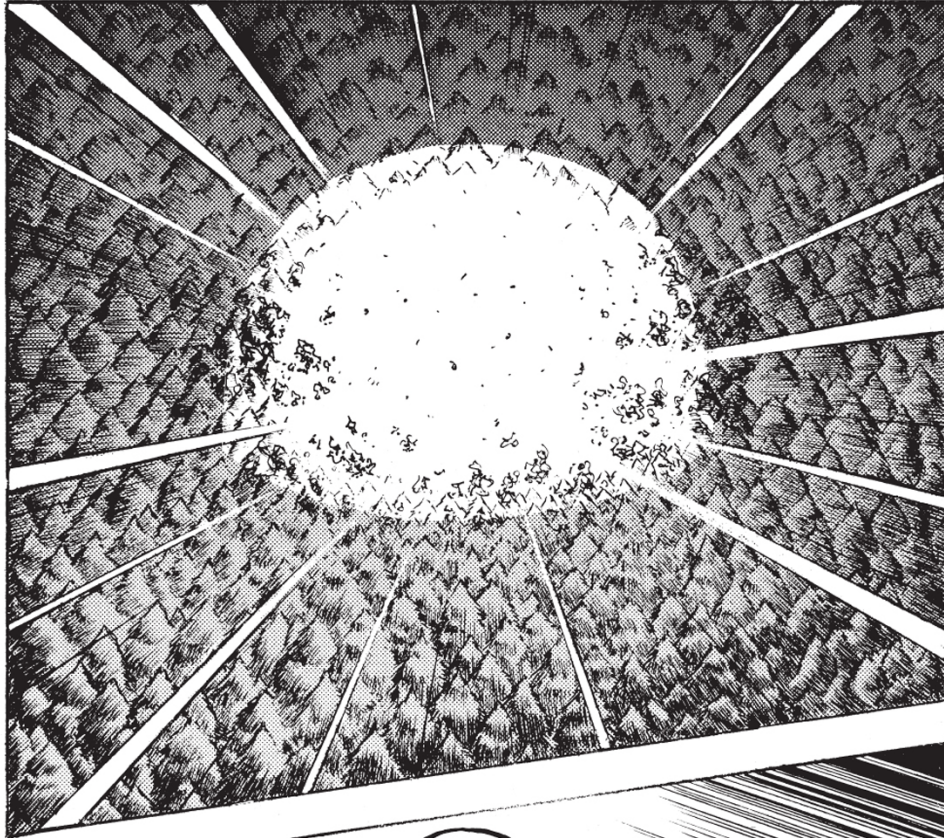
“He’s coming! He’s... Please, help! We have to escape! He’ll kill us! He’ll kill us all! Just like he killed *him*!” I panted, saying all kinds of evocative yet ambiguous things.

The lookouts shared a glance. One of them announced he’d check things out and then darted off into the forest.

While quaking in the closest bandit’s arms, I quietly whispered what would have been indecipherable to an ordinary person... Yup, it was a quick attack spell.

“(Hushed) Mega Brand!”

Blam! A swath of ground nearby exploded with a loud sound, sending the bandits into an immediate panic.



“Bwahh?!”

“He’s here! He’s here!” I screamed, pointing randomly into the forest.

“What?!”

“Where?!”

I quietly recited my next spell as ten or so men poured out of the ruins to investigate the commotion.

“What’s going on? What’s all the ruckus?”

And just then...

“(Still hushed) Vice Flare!”

Ba-boom! The bonfire the lookouts had been stoking suddenly exploded.

“What?”

“What’s happening?!”

The bandits were running around like chickens with their heads cut off. I had them right where I wanted them.

“Heh heh heh! That worked out even better than I hoped!”

I’d neutralized the bandits who’d come out of the ruins, and I’d now located their treasure deep within. It wasn’t exactly piled to the ceiling, but there was plenty of gold and silver to be claimed. I held up my cape and pulled a bit of linen lining from a hidden interior pocket. I then tied the edges together, and voila! A simple knapsack!

The remaining conundrum, then, was what to take. If I got too greedy and loaded my bag down with too much gold, it would be heavy and conspicuous. If I was really careless, I might even bust the strings on the way home and lose it all. So, should I go for gemstones, works of art, or magic items?

As I was contemplating my options...

“Hey, what are you doing there?” an angry voice called from the door.

Urk! I cringed.

If it were just another a bandit, I would’ve zinged him in the face with a spell and been done with it. But that

wouldn't work against this man. I slowly, warily turned around, and sure enough...

"Ohhh, Gourry! Fancy running into you!" I cooed as I balled up my fists under my chin and batted my eyes at him.

"Nothing fancy about it," he said, scratching his head in a troubled fashion. "Why in the world are you here?"

"Teehee! Not telling!"

"Don't try to joke."

Fine... If you insist.

I puffed out my chest and declared, "I'm huntin' bandits."

"Don't try to justify it."

Then what do you want me to do?!

"Forget it! We're getting out of here."

Without any room for objection, Gourry grabbed my hand and started to drag me away.

"H-Hey! Wait! My treasure...!"

"C'mon, you're makin' a big deal out of nothing!" I berated Gourry as we walked side-by-side down the road.

"Nothing'?" Gourry asked without even a glance my way. Yeesh, he was really mad...

"Slipping out of the inn in the middle of the night... What were you thinking?! For pity's sake!"

"I was planning for my brilliant future," I answered without hesitation. "Besides, what's wrong with beating up a bunch of bad bandits? Those guys loot treasure, you know! If I let them be, they'd just keep stealing from people!"

"And you were gonna take a commission for yourself, I'm sure," he said with a great sigh.

"Well, it's not like I know who it originally belonged to! And if I just left all that treasure lying around, the local lord would eventually confiscate it! Or worse, people would start fighting over it! So me taking it and spending it is the fastest way to get the economy back on track!"

"You're a real spin doctor, you know that?"

"Anyway, I thought you were asleep at the inn, Gourry..."

What I *really* wanted to ask him was, "Didn't my Sleeping spell work on you?" But I couldn't ask that. Nope. Not a chance.

"I hit the latrine and on my way back, I heard some noises coming from your room. So I went to mine and opened the window in time to see you use a Levitation spell to hit the ground and run off."

Go figure. That explained it.

Tch. Lucky bastard...

"Welp, on to more important matters," I said as Gourry and I both came to a stop.

Insects were calling in the trees, and a faint bit of starlight streamed down through the dark leaves.

"Why don't you come out already?" I said in a low voice, glaring deep into the brush.

At that, Gourry placed a hand on the hilt of his sword.

"You really don't do subtle, do you?" asked someone from behind me.

Impossible! No one had been there a minute ago. I was sure of it. Gourry and I both whipped around... and stood there stunned.

There he was, a cleric clad in robes the color of blood like he was shrouded by crimson shadows. His cape drifted in the wind. Most of his face was hidden, but two eyes peeked out from a hood pulled low... Two tightly-closed eyes.

"Rezo the Red Priest..." I whispered, almost in falsetto.

"It's been quite some time... I'm glad you're both well," he said brazenly, his expression completely unreadable. "It must not be easy, being beset day in and day out."

"Thanks to a certain someone distributing those lovely little wanted posters," I shot back.

In that moment, I realized something strange. I still couldn't sense Rezo's presence at all. There was no reason for him to mask it when he was standing right in front of me, so what was going on?

"Oh, you mean my invitation... I'm currently staying with

the High Priest of Sairaag, you see.”

Sairaag was about five days north of here. It had been known as the City of Magic, until it was destroyed by the beast Zanaaffar over a century ago. People accordingly called it the City of the Dead for a time, but the hero who slew the beast planted a tree in the middle of the fallen city. As that tree grew, so did the rebuilding efforts, and it now stood as a symbol of the newly thriving metropolis.

But... if Rezo was in Sairaag, then what were we talking to now?

I finally recalled the name of the spell: “Vision.” It let you manifest your likeness across long distances as though you were actually there, allowing you to have a conversation with someone from afar. It was one of the most convenient spells out there if you knew how to use it. But in order for it to work, you had to have a sorcerer on location acting as a relay for your projection... meaning Rezo had a lackey skulking around nearby.

“So... you want us to come to Sairaag, huh?” Gourry asked.

“Only if you care to,” the Red Priest replied mockingly. “But if you don’t, you’ll live as fugitives the rest of your days. That’s all.”

“That’s all, huh?” I found myself wincing. “Gourry might not mind, but I’m not eager for the experience.”

“C’mon, I don’t want that either...”

“Then I shall await your arrival. As trite as the phrase may sound, I do desire a reckoning,” he said, then disappeared in a flash.

Gourry and I just stared at each other for a while.

“Was that—” I finally started.

“You heard him,” a mysterious voice interjected, cutting me off.

Gourry and I whipped around again to see a man of medium height and build, dressed in your run-of-the-mill sorcerer getup with a black cape and hood. About his only

distinguishing feature was a ruby the size of a thumbnail embedded in his forehead. He was standing right where we'd originally sensed the presence, meaning he must have been hiding there the whole time as he relayed our conversation with Rezo.

"Aha..." I gave the guy a once-over; I could tell at a glance he was a hack. "Rezo's flunky, I take it?"

"Silence, brat," he snorted. "You won't be causing any more trouble for Lord Rezo... for I, Vrumugun, shall now administer your last rites!"

Wait a sec! Didn't Rezo want us in Sairaag? Was this guy going over his head?!

I guess you run into his type from time to time... People who act impulsively because they think it's for the best, even though they're just ultimately causing trouble for others.

"I wouldn't try it if I were you," I said, waving at him in dismissive annoyance. "You really don't stand a chance. Credit where it's due for tracking us down, though."

"I appreciate the compliment, but after that ruckus you caused in the middle of the night, finding you was child's play."

Well, excuse me.

"Now, let's see who doesn't stand a chance!" he cried, reaching his right hand behind his back. "Hah!"

I immediately ducked, dodging something black that came streaking toward my head.

Thunk! With a dull sound, a tree about twice as thick as one of Gourry's arms just behind me split in half down the middle.

"A chain whip?!" Gourry exclaimed, identifying it at a glance.

As its name suggested, it was a whiplike chain with a small weight at the end. Its power was plain to see, too. If used correctly, it could be more dangerous than any sword.

And while dishing out combo attacks with it, Vrumugun

began chanting a spell. It sounded like... a Fireball?!

Fireball was an indiscriminate attack spell. The caster unleashed a ball of light that would explode when it hit something, spreading flame everywhere. Was this idiot serious? Using one here in the middle of the woods would mean a forest fire on our hands... He might even end up roasting himself!

Ugh! I began a chant of my own as a red ball of light formed in Vrumugun's left hand. We finished our spells at nearly the same time.

"Fireball!"

"Freeze Bullid!"

Our differently colored spheres of light collided head-on.

Zing! There was a high, clear sound like something metal splitting, and both orbs were extinguished.

"What?!" Vrumugun yelped in surprise.

It seemed he didn't know spells could cancel each other out. It was something I'd discovered by accident on a job with a fellow female sorcerer once.

But just so you know, it didn't necessarily work with all spells of opposing properties. There were also ways to combine spells to produce something far more powerful. It just so happened that I knew Fireball and Freeze Bullid would negate each other. I would have liked to study more combinations, but even a genius like me needed a partner for that kind of thing, and the sorceress I knew ran off on her own some time before I met Gourry.

Anyway, most practitioners of magic didn't know about the mutual cancellation phenomenon, so it didn't surprise me that Vrumugun was so taken aback. He stopped in his tracks for a moment, unable to comprehend what he'd just witnessed. Gourry didn't fail to seize the opportunity. He closed in on the sorcerer in a flash and sent the dangerous weapon in his hand flying.

"Tch!"

Vrumugun quickly leaped backward. Gourry pursued. I

began to chant a spell. The sorcerer reached his right hand behind his back again like he was going to grab something... but Gourry kicked him in the solar plexus before he could.

“Ugh...”

The sorcerer buckled in half and fell to his knees just as I finished my chant.

“Elemekia Lance!”

Vrumugun folded like a cheap suit. The spell I’d just used directly damaged a target’s astral form. It wasn’t fatal to a normal person, but it would drain their spirit and put them to sleep for a while. Lucky for him, I’d used a low-powered version.

Why the kid gloves, you ask? Well, I didn’t want to knock him out cold. I had questions for our little friend Vrumugun here, see.

Just as I’d hoped, the sorcerer in question was collapsed on the ground, barely able to move. He was still conscious, but in no position to make trouble.

“You should’ve known it was reckless to take us both on at once,” I said while scowling into the sorcerer’s face. “It’s important to know your own limits... But enough with the lecture.”

Gourry was cautiously listening in on our conversation, close enough to lop the sorcerer’s head off the instant he tried anything funny. Knowing he was behind me gave me the confidence to go no-holds-barred with our sorcerer friend here.

“So, who was that?” I asked.

“Who was who?” Vrumugun asked in turn, his thin eyebrows twitching slightly. “Don’t tell me you don’t know Lord Rezo...”

I spoke again, enunciating every syllable: “We *killed* Rezo. Two months ago.”

After a moment, a cold smile appeared on Vrumugun’s face.

“Ha! What a preposterous lie... If that were true, then who

offered you an invitation to Sairaag just now?"

"That's what I'm asking you, buddy," I said.

He seemed to be under the unfaltering impression that the guy we'd spoken to *was* the real Rezo, meaning it was pointless to press him further about his true identity.

"Don't be absurd. Puny creatures like you could never defeat Lord Rezo!"

A rich line, coming from a guy whose ass we just kicked.

"Aww, you're funny. How exactly am I puny?"

The sorcerer looked me straight in the eye and said, "In the chest department, for starters."

"Oh, shut up!"

I snapped and sent the sorcerer flying.

Gourry and I departed the inn just before dawn the next day and walked side by side down the road thick with morning fog. We were still a little sleepy, but the enemy knew where we were and where we were going. That meant we had to move fast.

We'd left Vrumugun tied to a tree in the forest. Part of me thought we should eliminate him while we had the chance, but not even I could justify killing a helpless opponent.

"So... what do you think? About Rezo last night, I mean," I asked.

"To be honest," Gourry replied with a rare thoughtful expression, "I thought it might just be a lookalike."

Fair, but...

"It's possible that wasn't him, but rather something close," I mused.

"You mean... like a family member?"

"Well, that's also a possibility, but I'm thinking he's some kind of copy of Rezo."

"Copy?"

"Remember all those homunculi running around Atlas City?"

"Hmm... The name's kind of familiar, but I never really got

what their deal was.”

It suddenly dawned on me that I’d never actually explained to Gourry what a homunculus was.

“They’re artificial life forms created with magic. You can use a person’s blood to make one, and it looks just like them with all of their abilities and stuff.”

The word “homunculus” originally referred to an imp created from a man’s bodily fluids, but these days, the definition was a little broader. You could mix together powdered animal bones with dozens of other ingredients in certain ratios, combine them with human blood, and then through various procedures and rituals... The end result was an artificial human identical to the blood donor.

They were made with a totally different process and yielded totally different results than the original kind of homunculus, so you’d expect them to have a different name, but the sorcerer who’d come up with them threw his hands up and said, “Why don’t we just call them homunculi?” And it stuck. So, it was a little annoying, but we now had the old “small” homunculi and the newer “copy” homunculi.

The copy kind were generally used as guinea pigs and security guards, but lately, folks were raising ethical questions about their treatment. They looked and functioned just like people, after all, but unless their creator specifically bestowed them with it, copy homunculi had no will or memories of their own; they were effectively flesh golems.

“So if somebody made one with my blood, they could create a warrior with my skill?” Gourry asked.

I shook my head and explained, “It would be identical to you in terms of musculature, speed, reflexes... but a homunculus based on you wouldn’t have your sword technique or battle instincts. See, you can replicate someone physically, but you can’t replicate their learned behavior, habits, way of speaking, et cetera. A creator would have to imprint those specifically... and even then, there are

limitations. For instance, homunculi don't come with a personality. But if you can teach one how to talk and act..."

"Then you could make something like what we saw last night?"

"Yup," I answered with a firm nod. "Besides, it's not like we ever got to know the real Rezo all that well. So even if that was a clone or a twin, how would we tell the difference? We only saw him through a Vision spell too, so who knows about his aura?"

"So, basically, you're saying it's a fake either way?"

"Yeah. I mean, even if he's a real person, he's not Rezo."

"Then what the heck's going on here?"

"Well... this is just my running theory, but I think one of Rezo's people made a copy of him, and is now using it to rally his underlings and lure us to Sairaag. Probably to avenge Rezo, or like I said earlier, to make a name for themselves."

"Hmm..." Gourry hummed, looking into the distance with a hand on his jaw.

"You don't buy it?" I asked.

"Well, you've kinda been batting zero on the sharp deductions thing."

Ugh...

"L-Lay off, okay? Whatever the truth is, our only option is to proceed to Sairaag. Things should become much clearer there."

"We just have to go, huh?" he whispered unenthusiastically as he gazed into the fading morning mist.

"Guh!"

Gourry buried his fist in the man's solar plexus while I took out one of his friends with an Elemekia Lance. This was our sixth group of wannabe heroes today.

"I really wish we could do something about this..." Gourry said in annoyance. "It's not even noon yet, and we've already fought six bands of self-proclaimed do-gooders. Just

how many are we going to have to fend off before we make it to Sairaag?"

"Wanna pick up some disguises in the next town? It might be our best bet."

"Maybe, but first..."

"Yup. Looks like team number seven is already here," I said as I looked down the road.

The blue cobblestones trailed up a low hill before disappearing over top of it. The old innkeeper we'd spoken with before leaving this morning told us we'd find the next town on the other side.

There was a small stretch of woods on the right side of the road that stood over a wheat field. Above it and the hill, I could see the peaks of distant mountains. But right now, the dark figure at the forest edge had my attention. He was dressed in black sorcerer's robes with his hood pulled down over his eyes.

"Okay, let's do this already!" I declared, marching forward a bit recklessly.

"Thanks for last night," the sorcerer said. He sounded young.

But wait, we'd only fought one sorcerer last night...

"Have you forgotten Vrumugun already?" he asked.

"Hmm..." I scowled at him.

Gourry, beside me, reacted the exact same way. I certainly hadn't forgotten about Vrumugun... but this guy gave off a totally different vibe from the guy we'd encountered before. His voice seemed different, even...

Still, if he said it was him, surely it had to be, right? I couldn't see any benefit to impersonating the dude. But in that case... how had he caught up with us?

"All right... I give, but..." I said as I scratched my head. "You should really learn your lesson. You can't have forgotten how easily we beat you."

"Oh, but I brought some help today. Come on out, boys."

"...Okay..."

“Ugh, bossing me around...”

At Vrumugun’s order, two figures emerged from the forest.

“Wait, it’s *you* guys?!” I found myself shouting.

2: The Road to Sairaag Is Long, But...

"You seem well, kid," said a grinning werewolf with a heavy scimitar slung on his back.

To be fair, "werewolf" generally implied someone was part human, but the non-lupine part of this particular werewolf was troll. That meant he had not only the agility of a wolf, but also (and more importantly) the regenerative powers of a troll. Any slashes I inflicted on him would literally close right up before my eyes.

"And I can't believe you're still alive, you all-bark-and-no-bite sorry excuse for a werewolf."

My cutting remark caught him off-guard.

"Hey, that's mean..."

"It hurts because it's true, I'm sure," Vrumugun murmured.

"Shut up!"

While they argued among themselves, Gourry poked me in the shoulder and asked, "Do you know that werewolf?"

You see what I go through? I swear, this guy...

"Are you kidding me? You met him at least twice during that little ordeal of ours a couple of months ago. That's Dilgear, man! Dilgear!"

"Huh..." he mused while scratching his head. "I just can't tell animals apart."

Wow, that was even meaner than what I said...

Anyway, it looked like Dilgear was getting depressed, so I figured we'd lay off of him for a while. Instead, I turned my gaze to the second familiar figure that had emerged from the woods. Granted, his wasn't a face I cared to examine too

closely...

He was what you would call a fishman... though “fishoid” might better describe him. He was basically a fish blown up to the size of a person with human arms and legs tacked on. He looked like he’d stepped out of one of those children’s books they sell in big cities... but seeing one of these guys in real life would probably make most kids cry.

“Guess we finally get to throw down, eh, Master Nunsa?” I said, reticently attempting to look at him directly.

He met my gaze blankly with his glassy, hollow eyes.

Hey, don’t stare at me. Seriously. It’s creepin’ me out!

“Did you just call me... Nunsa?” the fishman whispered languidly after a few moments, his mouth flapping.

Wait... did I get the wrong guy? (Fish? Fishguy?) Not to sound like Gourry here, but it *was* pretty hard to tell them apart...

“You mean... you know that prettyboy?”

P-P-Prettyboy?!

Just so we’re on the same page, the fishman Nunsa I’d met before looked exactly—and I mean *exactly*—like the one I was talking to now. I know different species have different standards of beauty and all, but... wow. *Prettyboy?*

“I wonder how you could mistake me for the handsome Nunsa...”

H-Handsome? You gotta be kidding me...

“My name is Rahannim... and you’d best not judge me by my missing kinsman. Lord Rezo gave me the power to swim through the sky...”

I had no idea what he was mumbling about. But this whole conversation was giving me a headache and we were gonna have to fight sooner or later regardless, so...

“That’s right. Don’t underestimate us,” Dilgear interrupted, suddenly straightening up. “I’ve also grown tougher since—”

“Surprise Fireball!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, I popped a fireball at the

enemy trio. Always strike while the iron is hot! I knew it wasn't enough to take them out, but it would at least net me the initiative.

"Tch! Aggressive little...!" Vrumugun shouted as he flew backward a ways.

Rahannim also drew back into the wheat field. And as for Dilgear... Oh, he was a burnt husk now. Lucky shot!

"Hey! What's wrong with you?" the sorcerer shouted at his werewolf companion, who stood stock still as fragrant smoke wafted up from his body.

It was a pretty lame sight, honestly...

"Come, Rahannim!" cried the sorcerer.

"Okay..."

Almost instantly, the fishman straightened up.

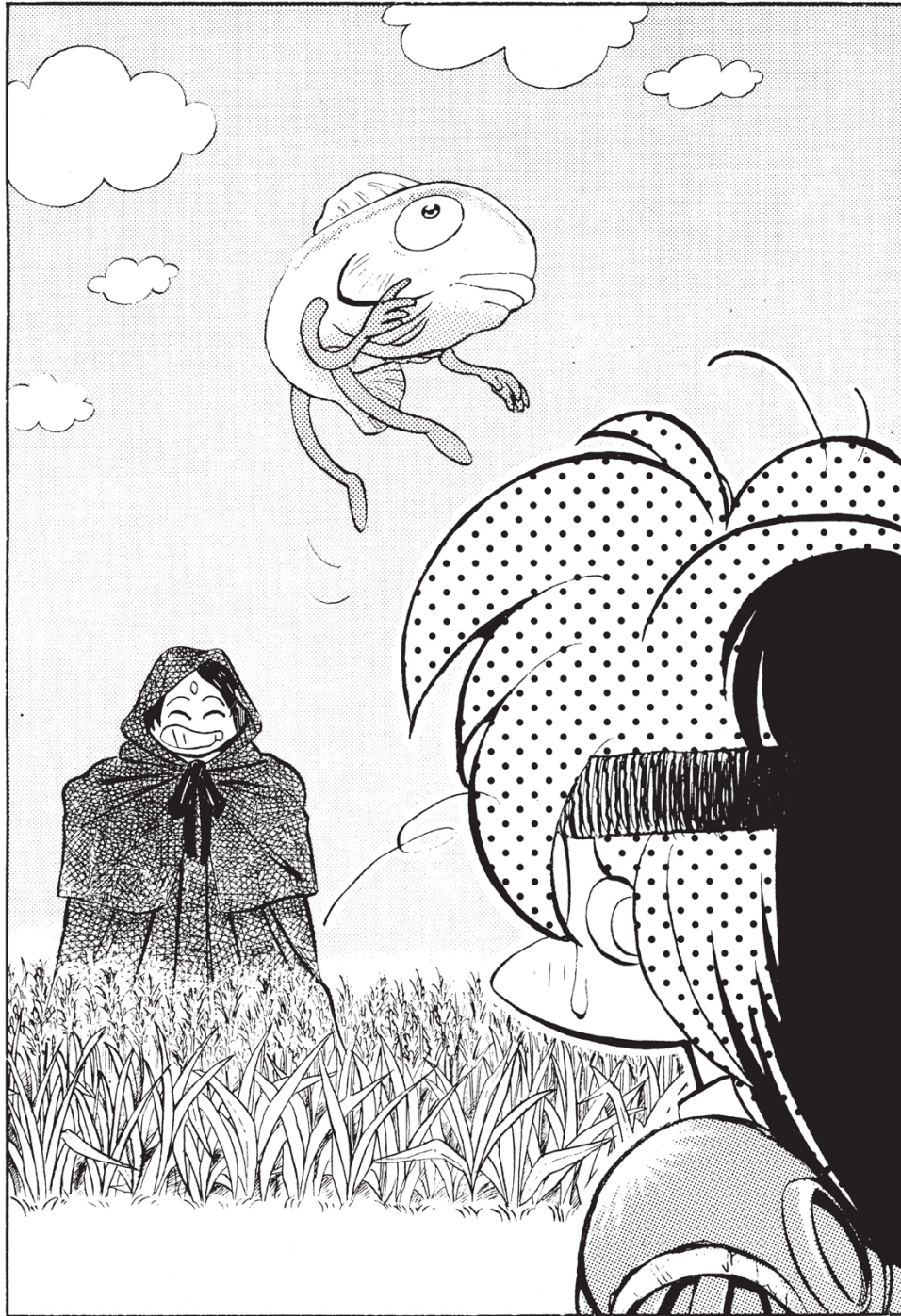
Wait a minute...

His feet lifted off the ground. In other words, he was now hovering in the air. His body twisted to the side, and then... he floated over to Vrumugun like he really was swimming through the sky!

"Go. Cut her to ribbons," the sorcerer commanded, reaching out with his right hand and lightly touching the fishman's stomach.

"Okay..."

The fishman twisted midair again in preparation...



I figured we were in for an attack, but not one so fast that Gourry and I couldn't track it. Vrumugun still seemed like he was underestimating us, and we could milk that overconfidence for our own gain.

"Lina!" Gourry called out the instant Rahannim disappeared from sight.

I let out a wordless exclamation, and my body reacted before I could think. A sharp gust of wind passed me on the right. I completely lost my balance and dove into the wheat field off the road.

I quickly righted myself. I thought I'd felt the grass cut my cheek as I tumbled, but I had bigger things to worry about right now. The great turtle shell pauldron on my right shoulder, right along with the ruby decorating it, had been cut clean in half.

"Missed the head, huh...?" Rahannim whispered as he stopped and turned around in midair after his strange yet surprising attack.

He was circling us now, like a carnivorous fish stalking its prey. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that he hit like a lightning strike. He was literally faster than my eyes could follow.

I was guessing he couldn't normally move at such speeds. Vrumugun had probably cast a wind barrier of some kind on him when he floated over to him earlier. That was the only way he could possibly move so unthinkably fast. Guess this means it was *us* who underestimated *them*, huh?

"Did you see that?" I asked Gourry while keeping my attention on Rahannim.

"Just the afterimage... What incredible speed," he replied to my dismay.

For the record, Gourry's a master swordsman. So if this fishman was moving so fast that even *he* couldn't track him... The only way to hit him was probably an indiscriminate barrage of attacks over a wide area, but even then, there was no guarantee. That left us with but one

recourse...

Rahannim suddenly vanished from sight again.

"Dah!" Gourry and I both exclaimed as we hit the deck.

Our plan? Keep dodging! I know, right? Pathetic.

A gust of wind sailed above our heads. It didn't seem like Rahannim had maneuverability to match his speed, so he couldn't move to compensate when we dodged. Unthinking brute charges against two people doing nothing but dodging... Anyone who saw us would find this a ridiculously elementary fight.

"You evaded me again. I wish you'd stand still..."

Rahannim begged.

It was an absurd request, though it was true we'd be at this all day if *someone* didn't do *something*. That being the case...

I started incanting a spell.

"Stupid... You think you can catch me with a spell? Well, you're free to try..." he said before vanishing a third time.

I finished my chant at the exact same time, and not a moment later...

Vwwssh!

There was a loud roar followed by a crash. I was just able to keep my footing, but the impact still knocked me back a few steps. Fortunately, the fishman got the worse of the deal—he went flying into the wheat field.

See, I'd erected a wind barrier of my own, which he'd proceeded to crash into at top speed... The two barriers canceled each other out, preventing damage to me. Now was my chance!

Without hesitation, I began another incantation. Gourry took off toward the fishman, who was currently struggling to right himself. I saw a flash of steel, but all Gourry cut down was a swatch of wheat.

"Impressive technique... Very clever..." Rahannim muttered, his eyes flickering slightly as he ascended.

He'd taken to the air a split second before Gourry's strike

landed. His beady, unfocused eyes made it hard to tell exactly what the fishman was looking at, but it now seemed his attention had shifted from me to Gourry.

Fortunately, I'd just finished my next spell.

"Bram Gash!" I cried, releasing an arrow of compressed air.

This baby exploded with deadly force when it struck its target. It was a single-target deal, but it was powerful enough to blast through a brick wall... and I was aiming it at Vrumugun, who was watching the fight unconcernedly from a high point in the forest. He never saw it coming!

To spare anyone who's reading while eating, I won't describe the result in detail...

"Master Vrumugun...!"

Rahannim flew toward the sorcerer in a panic, and I wasted no time moving on to my next spell.

"Lei Wing!"

My feet promptly lifted off the ground. This spell, you see, created a bubble of wind around the caster, allowing them to fly swiftly through the air. It was harder to control than Levitation, but if flying solo, it was fast enough to give your average bird a run for its money.

"Grab on, Gourry!" I called as my bubble flickered for a moment, allowing me to pluck my blond companion out of the field.

"What are we doing?!"

"Running!" I replied without hesitation.

"Curse you..."

When Rahannim realized what we were doing, he turned toward us once again. He then vanished, and a second later, my wind bubble bucked.

"Gwuh!"

I couldn't afford to drop the spell now. The fact that Rahannim could keep up that speed even after Vrumugun's untimely death suggested his barrier was on a timer. Once it finally faded, we should have no problem kicking his tail...

The trouble was that we had no idea how long the spell would last, and we had no choice but to wait it out.

Gourry and I sailed over the hill. The old man at the inn had been right; as we crested the summit, we could see a small city beyond.

Rahannim tore after us and slammed into us again.

"We can't shake him!" Gourry cried, looking rather pitiful as he clung to my waist.

The max speed, altitude, and carrying capacity of Lei Wing varied based on the caster's capacity. And while carrying Gourry, I just couldn't go fast enough to lose the fishman. But if I could just make it to town...

"Don't worry! I have a plan! Once we get to town, we'll come up with some disguises and have ourselves a little talk with the fishguy! When we do, say as little as possible! And whatever you do, don't use my real name! Just play along with everything I say!"

My wind spell was currently preventing Rahannim from overhearing our conversation. I took advantage of that to explain my simple strategy to Gourry.

...

"A-Are you sure about this, Lina?"

"Of course I am! But while the plan's in motion, no drawing your sword! And keep any hostile feelings to a minimum! Got it?!"

The fishman slammed us a few more times while I was giving Gourry the rundown, but he couldn't stop us from making it to the town. The wind we generated knocked over an old lady selling produce by the gate as we charged our way inside.

"Sorry!" I cried as we sailed through the streets, bowling over an orange stand and knocking down several passers-by along the way.

"Hey, hey! Lina!"

"I'll field all complaints later!"

Flying down the main thoroughfare, I cast glances left and

right...

Perfect! That'll do the trick!

Rahannim closed in on us again, but this time, I smashed into *him*. The fishman lost his balance and slammed into a stall. I immediately doubled back the way we'd come, turned down the side street I'd spotted earlier, and dismissed my Lei Wing spell.

We were now in a lumber yard. Squared timber, planks, and freshly cut logs were stacked up on the ground and rested against the stone walls of the property.

"Gourry! Take off your armor and sit on that woodpile! And don't forget what I told you earlier! No time to explain! Just hurry!"

As I barked orders at Gourry, I was removing my own pauldrons, cape, sword, and gloves. I slapped my cape on Gourry's shoulders and stashed everything else behind a lumber pile. Lastly, I took off my bandanna, jammed my hands into my pants pockets, and plopped down next to him.

"Remember: say as little as possible," I cautioned him, and not a second too soon...

Rahannim appeared from the end of the street. There was a long pause as he looked us over.

"I've got you now..." he finally said in his sluggish, monotone voice.

I stared at him in puzzlement for a minute, then spoke up in a tone of slight aggrievement, "Excuse me? Who are you, exactly?"

As expected, Rahannim fell silent. He seemed to be thinking something over.

"You can't fool me, Lina Inverse and Gourry Gabriev...!"

"Uh, *who*?" I asked, blinking a few times.

"You're not them...? Then might I ask... did a brown-haired sorceress and a yellow-haired warrior come this way?" the fishman inquired, looking around wildly.

"Dunno... Hey, Leon, you think that was them?" I asked,

turning to Gourry.

"Huh? Wha?!" Gourry exclaimed, flustered over being put on the spot.

But before he could let the cat out of the bag, Rahannim cut in, "You saw them?!"

"Yeah. They just zoomed by that-a-way." I indicated across the yard opposite where the fish had come in. "Then I think they... hmm, yeah, they took a left at the second intersection."

"Thank you for your help..."

Not bothering to hear the rest of my explanation, Rahannim shot off at top speed in the direction I'd pointed.

Mwahaha! A triumphant grin broke out on my face.

"What the heck was that all about?" Gourry asked in confusion some seconds after the fishman took off.

"He can't tell humans apart," I said.

"What?"

"Remember earlier, at the bottom of the hill, when you said you couldn't tell animals apart? It's the same thing. Our species are so different that, to a fishman, the only way to distinguish us is by hair color and clothing. So when he saw us here, he had a conundrum. We weren't wearing the right clothes, but our hair was the right color and he knew we'd come this way..."

"Yet if it really *was* us, surely we wouldn't have the audacity to sit around so nonchalantly, right? That's what got him so confused and why he tried to trick us into confessing by saying, 'I've got you now.' But boy did I turn that one around on him, and he totally bought it."

"Hmm..." Gourry scratched his head, still seeming a bit skeptical. "Are we really that hard to identify? If I had two cats of the same pattern in front of me, even I could probably tell them apart."

"If you *only* had two, maybe. There'd be slight differences in size, markings, color, et cetera... but if you caught a glimpse of a cat the next day, could you tell if it was one of

those two or a completely different cat? I'd bet not."

"Well... I guess you're right..."

"I hear werewolves can still tell us apart by smell, though —"

"Hush!" Gourry exclaimed, suddenly silencing me as I rattled on.

I could immediately tell why. Rahannim's fishy silhouette had just appeared at the end of the road! Was he on to us already?!

"Pardon..." the fishman ventured as he floated over to us. "Are you sure it was a left at the second intersection?"

Whew. False alarm.

"Come to think of it... I wasn't watching that closely. It could've been the third one," I lied through my teeth.

"Oh... Excuse me, then..."

With that, the fishman disappeared down the alley again. After watching him go, I grinned at Gourry.

"See?"

"Honestly, sorcerers' capes are pretty annoying," Gourry muttered to himself as we scarfed down our lunch.

"Quit complaining. It's a small price to pay to keep the goon squads off us, isn't it?"

After giving Rahannim the slip, Gourry and I went to a tailor to put the finishing touches on our disguises. I was now dressed in a priest's white robe, my lovely hair pulled back into a ponytail over my bandanna. Unfortunately I'd had to ditch my pauldrons after Rahannim cut one through. I'd stowed my cape and gloves in my knapsack, and secured my sword on my back. You couldn't see it under my vestments unless you knew what you were looking for.

Gourry, meanwhile, was dressed as a sorcerer clinking with carved rings and amulets. He was wearing a large cape over his usual iron serpent scale breastplate and we'd done his hair up in a slightly different style, but the sword on his belt definitely stuck out. He'd begged me just to let him

keep it, and I'd relented out of sympathy.

He made for an exceptionally brawny sorcerer, but we lived in an age of warrior-maidens weaker than children and strong-as-balls pacifists. So, why not? He fit right in.

"But still..." Gourry whined, fiddling with the cape hanging from his shoulders even as he continued to eat. "These are more like costumes than real disguises. It would only take one look to see right through us."

"If they *really* look at us, maybe," I said as I took a sip of my prann soda. "All the vigilantes coming after us have only ever seen our likenesses on those wanted posters. Just changing our getup and hairstyles should render us unrecognizable to that lot. You'd have to know us personally to pick us out of a crowd."

I spoke with confidence, completely sure of myself. It was just then that I heard a man address me.

"Hey there, Lina. Lookin' good, babe."

I froze.

I turned around to see a mercenary standing there. At least he didn't seem hostile. He looked about the same age as Gourry. He had flaming red hair and his face would be pretty easy on the eyes... if not for his ridiculous beard that was way too long for a guy his age. I'm telling you, so many people lack basic self-awareness about... Wait, huh?

"Hey, it's been a while!" Gourry called out with a wave.

"Thanks again for savin' my hide," the man responded, returning the gesture.

I was somehow out of the loop here, and vaguely annoyed about it.

I leaned over the table and asked Gourry in a quiet voice, "Uh, who is this?"

"What are you talking about? It's Lantz!"

"Wha?!" I whipped around and took a closer look at the guy. "Oh... you grew a beard."

Lantz was a traveling mercenary we'd met a while back during a certain ordeal (*not* the one involving the Red

Priest). He wasn't exactly a master swordsman, but he was first-rate for sure. He was clean-shaven the last time I saw him, however, which was why I hadn't recognized him just now.

"It grew out while I was healin' up. Thought about shavin' it off, but then I thought... nah."

"Boy, talk about crappy taste."

"Hey, lay off. Anyway... guess you guys've been through some rough times lately, huh?" Lantz said as he pulled up a chair (uninvited) and started digging into our array of food.

Can you believe this guy?! What a freaking asshole!

"Hold it, you..."

When he realized I was eyeballing him, he said between bites, "Don't worry. I've been makin' good money lately. I'll pick up the tab."

Ooh! A big spender! I always liked that Lantz guy!

I raised my hand and called out abruptly, "Mistress! Two more hors d'oeuvre plates, please!"

"What is *wrong* with you?" Lantz glared at me sidelong. "Seriously, Bro, it must be rough traveling with someone like her."

Ever since witnessing Gourry's skill with a blade, Lantz had fallen head-over-heels for the man and started referring to him as his brother.

"Well... she does eat a lot, and she's always sticking her nose where it doesn't belong, and her mouth usually gets us into trouble..."

"Hey, hang on a minute! You pack it in even more than me! And you, Lantz! Don't just nod along like you believe everything he says!"

"Now, setting all that aside... I want to ask you a question, Lantz."

"What is it, Bro?"

"When you first saw us here, did you recognize us right away? We're supposed to be in disguise, so..."

Lantz paused, then let out a lamentative sigh.

"Bro... come on, man. Those aren't disguises, they're costumes. A stray cat could see right through you."

"See?" Gourry remarked with a dirty look my way.

Ugh...

"B-But if you didn't know us, you'd have *nooo* idea who we were, right?" I asked.

Lantz cracked a playful smile and lowered his voice.

"Ahhh... This is about those wanted posters, ain't it?"

"You—! You know about those?" I squeaked, raising my voice a little before forcing it back down into a whisper.

"Course I do. You're the talk of the whole region. No one's ever seen a bounty that size, so everyone wants to know what the hell you did. I mean, / know you're good guys, but to have a bounty like on your heads... You must've pissed off someone reeeally important. So, what *did* you do?" he asked—like this was all our fault, I might add!

"Y'know... stuff," I equivocated.

"I get it, I get it... So you're running away from whoever put the bounty on you, are you?" he asked.

"Actually, we're on our way to meet him in Sairaag," Gourry admitted, much to my vexation. Like, maybe *don't* get other people mixed up in this mess? Just maybe?

"Oh, taking the fight to him, huh? Gotcha. Then how's about I come with, Bro? I could help you fool potential bounty hunters on the way there."

I was a little surprised by Lantz's enthusiasm. During our last adventure together, he turned tail and ran the moment demons entered the picture.

"Look, buddy. You make it sound like it's no big deal, but we're probably staring down a serious big bad here. We don't know the full extent of the situation yet ourselves, but..."

"Yeah, yeah," Lantz said, still sounding breezy. "But I owe you guys one. And I'm not saying I'm gonna join in the fight against whoever's got it out for you... I just happen to be on my way to Sairaag myself."

"Wait... You're not on your way back?" I asked, stunned.

When we last parted ways, Lantz had said he was going sightseeing in Sairaag. That was about a week before we left Atlas City ourselves, so I figured he'd already had his fun and was on his way home.

"What in the world slowed you down so much?" Gourry asked.

"You, uh, could say I hit a snag along the way..." Lantz laughed, scratching his head awkwardly.

Sounded more like he'd gotten obsessed with some woman... But whatever.

"But are you serious? Like, for real? Not to repeat myself or anything, but this guy could seriously kill you," I cautioned.

Lantz was abjectly silent for a few minutes. He was the kind of guy who wore his heart on his sleeve.

"W-Well... if things get too dangerous, I'll make a run for the hills before I screw things up for you guys," he finally said with an awkward laugh.

"Okay... If you're sure you want to tag along, I don't mind. And I'm sorry to be so blunt about this, but if it comes down to it, I really do want you to run, okay? I can't guarantee we'll have a moment to spare to bail you out."

Lantz gulped hard, but nodded in agreement.

The sky had been clear since we left town that morning. The journey had since gone so smoothly that I was pretty sure we'd reach Sairaag by noon today. Disguises and an extra traveling companion seemed to have done the trick; it was almost hilarious how quickly the bounty hunters and so-called heroes disappeared. We hadn't seen any more of Rezo's flunkies either.

"Hey, wouldja look at that? Seems like we'll make it there safe and sound after all," said Lantz cheerfully.

"Yeah, seems like it," I replied with a light nod. "But it's dangerous to get overconfident."

"I *know*, okay?"

"We'll be coming to a forest soon," Gourry whispered out of nowhere. Lantz and I looked over at him. "I think it's called the Miasma Forest. It's got this weird aura that's just there all the time, so it's impossible to detect enemies when you're inside it. If anyone's going to attack us, it'll probably be there."

"Hmm..." I tensed for a moment before a question struck me. "Say, Gourry, how do you know about the Miasma Forest?"

I knew the legend of the Miasma Forest myself. Long ago when the beast Zanaffar, destroyer of Sairaag, was slain by a warrior wielding the Sword of Light, its blood soaked into the ground nearby. Ever since, a fiendish presence was said to linger about the place. And, though no one knew for sure if the two things were connected, the frequency of disappearances and violent crimes in the area made even the slums of the notorious harbor town Flowave look like an ideal vacation spot.

The legend frequently did the rounds among sorcerers, but even if he was the descendant of the warrior of the Sword of Light, I was surprised a perpetual ignoramus like Gourry knew it. When I inquired about that, however, he went silent with a curious expression on his face.

"W-Well... I've been in the area once before, so..."

"Uh-huhhh..."

"Likely story!"

Lantz and I both fixed him with a glare.

"Wh-Why are you two looking at me like that?!"

"Come to think of it, you seemed pretty put-off about coming to Sairaag in the first place. I wonder why, huh?" I suggested.

"You did some tomcatting 'round here, didn't you, Bro?" Lantz said, catching my drift.

"Are we gonna waltz into town to find a buncha little Gourrys running around?"

"A dozen of 'em'll come running, crying 'Papa, you came to see me!' and 'No, he's *my* papa!'"

"Oh, scandalous!"

"Would you two please stop...?"

The forest was eerily quiet, smothered by a strange chill and a raw smell of greenery so strong that it was almost overpowering. The leaves of the trees were so richly colored they were almost black.

"Kind of a... weird place, huh?" Lantz whispered to no one in particular with a full-body tremble.

"Yeah... it's weird."

I could feel a peculiar presence around me. It seemed to permeate the entire place like a slightly diluted version of miasma.

The forest itself was perfectly silent. There were no birds singing, no insects chirping. It was like the haunted woods straight out of a nightmare.

And yet there was that presence. It came drifting down from the treetops, wafting over from the underbrush, and bubbling up from the grass at my feet. It was coming from the forest itself.

"It's just like the rumors said. The forest itself emits so much of that bizarre presence that you'd never know if there were enemies lurking nearby..."

Just as I said that, there was a rustling in the underbrush.

"What?!"

"I-Is someone there?!"

Gourry and Lantz both reached for their swords. I, however, turned my attention to the underbrush on the other side of the path in the event that the rustling was a diversion. If we knew for certain an enemy was hiding there, I wouldn't hesitate to nail them with an attack spell. But I couldn't act just yet on the chance it was an innocent person.

The brush remained still. So did we.

"What now?" Gourry asked.

"You think... it was a rabbit or something running from a predator?" Lantz asked in turn.

Not being able to detect the presence of others through the miasma really was a pain in the ass. Still... we couldn't just stand around here...

But just then...

"Ngh... hnn..."

A soft moan came from where the brush had rustled. It sounded like a young woman.

"Oh, look, it's just a woman," Lantz said, immediately letting his guard down as he strode guilelessly toward the sound.

"Wait, Lantz!"

By the time Gourry screamed, Lantz was already deep in the brush. Assuming someone wasn't a threat just because they were female was, sadly, a common tendency in men.

"Hey, it's okay. Looks like she just collapsed," he called back casually enough.

Gourry and I shared a glance, then followed after him.

There was indeed a woman collapsed in the brush. Actually, saying "girl" was probably more appropriate. She couldn't have been much older than me.

She was wearing a short sleeveless jacket and even shorter shorts. Her otherwise bare arms and legs were covered by soft gloves up to her biceps and long socks up to her thighs, but I was sure she was cold in this weather, what with that exposed midriff and all. She also had a bright red bandanna over her short brown hair and a large knife on her hip.

She looked sort of like an aspiring bandit, but the boyish getup was cute on her. And dammit... Her chest was a bit bigger than mine, too.

Anyhoo, the three of us took a moment to stare at the collapsed girl.

"What should we do?" Gourry asked.

"What else? Our worst! Heh heh heh..." Lantz leered.

"Don't even think about it, pervert," I hissed. "This could be a trap, but if it's not, we can't just leave her here..."

"Well, I say it's obvious. We gotta help her. She's cute, so she can't be evil."

Lantz... you freaking idiot...

"I agree," Gourry said with unusual gusto.

Men, am I right? Go figure...

"Hey, wake up, miss. What happened to you?" Lantz cooed, taking the girl in his arms and shaking her a little.

True to form, of course, he used the opportunity to touch her in some questionable places.

"Mm... ah..."

The girl's eyes at last opened slightly, and she stretched like a kitten. She didn't seem especially distressed.

"Mm... Huh?" She stared briefly at Lantz in disbelief and looked around in confusion. Then she snapped her fingers.

"He got me... Zelgadis, you cur!"

"Z-Zelgadis?!" Gourry and I chimed at once.

"You know Zel?" I asked, drawing in close to her.

"You bet I... Ahhh! Lina Inverse?! What—" She quickly clamped a hand over her own mouth, then went fishing around in the pockets of her shorts. She produced a copy of the wanted poster and studied us as she looked at it. "I knew it! Lina Inverse and Gourry Gabriev! And some guy!"

"Hey now..." Lantz scowled.

"Mistaken identity. It happens a lot, but we're not them," I lied brazenly with an indulgent smile.

But she continued to jab at the poster and insisted, "No, I'm sure of it! You might pull one over on someone else, but you can't fool Eris the famous bounty hunter!"

"Famous bounty hunter? I've never even heard of you..."

"Yeah..."

"Me neither..."

"W-Well... I'll be famous someday! The point is that this is the end of the line for you! Give yourselves up this instant!"

she declared, drawing her knife and lunging at me.

Fat chance, honey... I grabbed her wrist and gave it a twist.

"Ow, ow, ow! H-Hey! Let go, you coward!" Eris floundered as I held her in a joint lock.

"I don't think the person who draws a knife out of nowhere should be calling anyone a coward."

"Whoever loses the fight gets to call the winner a coward! That's how it works!"

"Is it just me, or is this girl a lot like Lina?"

"Don't you start, Lantz! And don't nod along, Gourry! Now, *Mistress* Eris... we have a few questions for you."

"I'd rather die than consort with criminals," she replied with a haughty snort.

"That can be arranged."

"P-Please! I'll tell you anything!"

Smart girl, this one.

"That Zelgadis guy you mentioned earlier... Is he around here?"

"Yeah. Ever since the posters came out, I've been chasing him— Ow, not so tight! He made it to Sairaag about five days ago and was asking about the Red Priest who levied the bounty..."

"Wait a minute! You're telling me Rezo the Red Priest is really in Sairaag?!" I shouted, interrupting her.

Eris made a sour face but obediently answered my question, "Yes, he is. I hope you're not on your way there to kill a great man like him too!"

It felt a little weird to hear her call him "a great man," but I reminded myself that he did appear as a saint to those who didn't know his true character. We didn't have time to give Eris the whole "real Rezo" rundown, and I doubted she'd believe me even if we told her the truth. So to make things simple, I decided to choose my words wisely.

"This is all just a big misunderstanding. Someone set the Red Priest up to put that bounty on our heads. We're

heading for Sairaag to clear things up... though you probably won't believe that." (It *was* a lie, after all.)

"Zelgadis isn't with us, of course, so I don't know what he's up to. He might actually be after the Red Priest... but either way, we need to find him and talk to him. So can you please tell us what's going on in Sairaag?"

"Hmm..." Eris used her free arm to scratch her head, then began, "I'm not sure where to start... Everything I know is just rumor, but they say the Red Priest arrived in Sairaag about a month ago, that he's staying with the high priest there, and that he put out the bounty on you three. I saw those posters in another city, tracked Zelgadis down, and ended up pursuing him all the way here. He's been working with the daughter of the high priest of Sairaag to kill the Red Priest."

"W-Wait a minute," I interrupted again. "I get Zel, but... why is the high priest's daughter trying to off the Red Priest?"

"How should I know? This is just what I've heard... Anyway, their plot was foiled and everyone in the city's talking about it."

"I'll bet..."

Darn it, Zelgadis, tying my hands again... I'd have to give him an earful the next time I saw him.

"Obviously, they couldn't hide out in the city anymore. I saw the two of them enter the Miasma Forest and..."

"You followed them on your own?" I said with a sigh. "You didn't even try to get help?"

"If I had help, I'd have had to split the bounty, stupid. So I went after them myself, but I guess they noticed me following them, because *they* got the drop on *me*. Someone hit me from behind and I was out like a light."

"That's too bad... Shoulda seen that one coming."

"Hey! I didn't ask for your input!"

"Anyway, I think that gets us up to speed. So, what do you think, Gourry?"

"Er, sorry. I wasn't listening."

"Argh... Argh... Argh..." I was seething. "Okay, listen up! I'm gonna put this so plainly that even a dog could understand it, which should *hopefully* do it for you, too. Zelgadis! Is! In! This! Forest! Right! Now!"

"Great, we can find him then," Gourry said guilelessly. *Seriously?*

"And how, pray tell, are we gonna do that?!"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be struggling."

"You don't look like you're struggling at all!"

Pant... Pant...

"Lina, you shouldn't get so worked up. You'll sprain something," Lantz said, looking vaguely astonished as he watched us. "Though I gotta say... you guys make for quite a show."

"A-Anyhoo, instead of heading to Sairaag while it's on high alert, we should find Zel and get the lowdown from him," I suggested.

Gourry and Lantz both nodded.

"What'll we do with her?" Lantz then asked, indicating Eris with his chin.

"Ah... aha... well..." A strained smile appeared on her face. "I was thinking I'd just be going now..."

"If we let her go," Lantz began, completely ignoring her suggestion, "she might go back to Sairaag and sic the townfolk on us. And if we take her along, she'll be dead weight. But she's a neutral party, so we can't just kill her... Maybe we oughta knock her out again, leave her here, and let the rest work itself out."

"I'm sold."

"W-Wait a minute!" Eris panicked. "I don't want that... Please, I—"

Before she could finish, there came a rustling in the underbrush. Gourry and Lantz both twisted away. An object like a white spear impaled where they'd just been standing, then retracted.

I released Eris's arm and quickly stood up. The two warriors drew their swords in a flash. Gourry threw off the black cape he'd found such a nuisance.

"Oho... you're quite quick..." A man appeared out of the brush.

Eris clapped her hands to her mouth to smother a scream. "Wh-What is..."

It was an understandable reaction. The man was dressed in black clothing so tight you could see the contours of his body. He was chillingly handsome, but only the left half of his face was visible. The right side of his face was...

Blank. No eyebrow, no hair, no eye nor ear. His mouth seemed to end right at the midpoint of his face, and even the protuberance of his nose disappeared past that line.

All there was instead was a featureless lump of white flesh.



"A demon..." I whispered.

He bowed deeply in response. "A servant to Lord Rezo. My name is Vizea. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Can't say I'm thrilled myself..." Gourry said sarcastically, one eyebrow twitching upward.

"Well..." Vizea's one-sided mouth quirked up in a facsimile of a smile. "I must admit that I don't think we'll know each other long."

Eris tugged on my sleeve.

"What?" I asked, without looking back at her.

"Did you just say... that's a demon?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Yeah."

"B-But... I met a lesser demon once and it didn't look anything like that..."

"This is a pretty high-ranking demon. He's much tougher than any lesser demon."

"Exactly... how much tougher?"

"Think a tiger to a kitten."

"I'm out!" Eris shouted and ran off in a panic.

Obviously, I wasn't going to stop her. I wasn't going to have time to guard a novice while facing an opponent like this. But...

"Eek!" she let out a small shriek behind me.

I turned around reflexively to see a large spider blocking her escape.

"No running now, little miss," the arachnid said in our language as it licked its chops.

Eight legs and a giant abdomen... Its general silhouette was that of a giant spider, but it had a human's skin and head. I couldn't help but wonder, then, did it still shoot thread out of its... you know? The mere thought made this a very upsetting enemy. Try not to picture what I just said, okay? I mean, if you want to have an appetite ever again.

"Let her go, Barz," said yet a third voice from a new direction. "These opponents will be enough of a handful. We

haven't the time to toy with an innocent."

The third member of their posse was a sorcerer dressed in black. His clothing and face were completely unremarkable, apart from the ruby embedded in his forehead.

"Tch..." the spider spat. "You're too soft, Master Vrumugun."

"What?!" Gourry and I shouted in the same breath.

"It's been a while." The sorcerer in question smiled brightly. "You've given me a lot of trouble in the past, but this time, I'll win for sure."

"H-Hang on a minute, you!" I found myself shouting. "You can't be Vrumugun! That dude is *dead*!"

His smile unwaning, he replied, "Did you think your meager efforts would be enough to destroy the great Vrumugun?"

Meager efforts? Look, buddy...

The day he ambushed us with Rahannim and Dilgear, I'd nailed him head-on with a spell. Gourry and I had both gotten a gruesome eyeful of the aftermath, and if I may be so blunt, the only way to bounce back from something like that was with a dragon's stamina, a troll's regenerative powers, and a cockroach's sheer bloody-mindedness.

"I can't believe you survived... You're one crazy guy," Gourry said, sounding almost impressed.

Not that it was really a matter of sanity, but whatever.

"I guess that makes it three-on-three," I said with a confident smile. Obviously, I was discounting Eris, who was still standing there petrified under the spider's stare.

"Are you sure about that?" Vrumugun asked, pointing up above us.

There was a shadow darting about the sun-dappled canopy—Rahannim! I tossed a quick glance back over my shoulder.

"I guess it's four-on-four, then."

"Don't include me!" Eris screamed, terrified.

"You're outnumbered either way," came a new, deep

voice.

Hang on a minute! Just how many guys do they have?!

The newcomer stepped out from behind Vizea. It was a creature with a troll's proportions, but squashed shorter and fatter with especially large ears. His hands, too, seemed unusually long. He must have been some kind of troll-based chimera.

"Hey, Master Vizea," it said.

"That reminds me," the demon mused, raising his right hand high and snapping his fingers. The miasma of the forest suddenly felt thicker.

Rustle...

There was noise among the trees in every direction. Eris let out a shriek. Gourry and Lantz both froze, and a chill ran up my spine.

Lesser demons had emerged from the forest. Over a dozen of them.

It made sense when I stopped to think about it. The so-called Rezo was here in Sairaag. This was his turf. We should've been prepared to fight a force of this magnitude.

They'd probably come here after Zelgadis. And then, Vrumugun—who'd somehow survived his last ordeal—happened to spot us along the way. I was still a little stumped that the guy was still alive, but he and Rahannim were the only two members of his squad who'd seen us before and I knew for a fact that the fishman couldn't tell humans apart.

After thinking it over, though, I decided that while the most plausible explanation really was that Vrumugun had survived, there were a few other possibilities. Maybe our disguises were less effective than I thought. Maybe "Vrumugun" was actually the name of some race of beings I'd never heard of and this dude just happened to overhear us calling each other Lina and Gourry.

Granted, the more pertinent question now was how to get out of this jam. Our biggest problem was that crowd of lesser

demons. I could bust us out of here a few different ways if not for them.

Just so you know, lesser demons are the bottom of the demon family barrel. Nevertheless, they're well beyond what your run-of-the-mill swordsmen and sorcerers can handle. They're immune to most elemental shamanistic spells, and while physical attacks *can* hurt them, their skin's as hard as dragon scales. They're typically easy pickings for a world-class genius sorcerer like me, but they could still be a handful in large numbers. So, as for my options...

"Oh, that's right. I haven't introduced myself yet," the trolloid late arrival said, staring straight at us. The man-spider Barz behind me quietly began moving to the side.

Honestly, I didn't care. I didn't want to hear his stupid name.

"In human language, they call me Goliath. But the true pronunciation is—"

There, he opened his mouth wide and unleashed a roar that shook the leaves right off the trees.

The violent shockwave that followed slammed into us.

We all let out silent screams in response. It was hardly a fatal blow. But while it hadn't sent me end-over-end, it still knocked me on my back. I was stunned for a moment, and in that moment... white spears rained down on us! They were made of flesh, lashing out from the formless right side of Vizea's face.

And so, the battle began.

"Yeeek!" Eris let out a pitiful wail and rolled away. A white spear grazed her side.

Gourry (easily) and Lantz (just barely) deflected the incoming spears with their swords.

I sprung back, vaulted the collapsed Eris, and made a break for the spider behind her. I drew my sword from my back and sliced at Barz while chanting a quiet spell.

"Uwee-hee!" the arachnid cried in delight as it jumped up to a nearby branch. Head down, abdomen up.

He had the high ground on me now. I leaped back to get some distance.

“Hyah!” Barz shouted and lunged.

There was a knife-like claw at the end of each of his eight legs. It would be impossible to block them all with a sword. In that case...

I quickly ducked down and executed a forward roll. I had to abort my spell, but I managed to dodge Barz’s attack. The minute I was back on my feet, I saw a ball of light rushing straight for me.

“Waaaah!”

I instinctively threw myself to the ground again. The light hit a tree some distance behind me, bursting into red flame. It must have been a Fireball courtesy of Vrumugun.

Lantz was currently dealing with Rahannim, who dove down from the treetops. The fishman was having trouble getting to top speed in the cluttered forest setting, however, and was struggling to work up a decent attack.

Meanwhile, Gourry drew a pin from his pocket and used it to release the mechanism holding the blade into his sword hilt.

“Hah!”

Then, in one swift motion, he swung his sword at Goliath. He was too far away for a normal sword to reach, but with the blade unfastened, it flew from its handle toward Goliath—and Gourry was right on its heels!

“Gwuh?!”

Goliath dodged the blade in a panic, but Gourry was already upon him.

“Light, come forth!” our swordsman cried out, and from the empty hilt in his hand sprung a shining blade that could even slay demons! This was his ace-in-the-hole, the Sword of Light!

Ha! One down!

Or so I thought, but before he could land the hit, Gourry was forced to leap to the side as a few dozen arrows of flame

scorched where he'd just been standing. It was an attack from the lesser demons.

Tch! Ruining our fun! I thought angrily. *Lantz must be slacking off...*

The spider Barz lunged at me again. I managed to dodge him again and ended up beside Eris, who, ignored by both sides, was trying to sneak away. If only I'd had time to chant a spell...

Barz lunged a third time, sending me leaping to yet another location. I could have used my sword too, but I knew I didn't stand a chance in a scuffle with a guy who had eight freaking legs.

He landed next to Eris and shot a glance her way. *Crap!* He was after her again!

"Your presence annoys me," he said, raising one of his legs toward her.

She froze in place, but just then...

"I told you to let her be, Barz!" Vrumugun scolded in a voice close to a scream.

Barz stopped mid-strike and clicked his tongue in reply: "I'll be quick about it!"

"Don't waste any time on her!"

Too bad for them... I wasn't about to let this momentary lapse in their teamwork slide. Don't underestimate my fast-talking ability. I'd already finished my spell!

"Blast Ash!"

Vwom!

With a heavy sound, the spell I unleashed immediately turned two lesser demons in the trees and Vrumugun standing in front of them to ash.

"What?!"

It was only then that Barz seemed to realize who he was really up against. He stopped cold, his legs still poised to strike.

Eris, snapping out of her terror, quickly fled.

We were still at a major disadvantage here, but we were

turning the tides in our favor.

“Gwaaaah!” Barz reeled back, then leaped at me with a battle cry.

I dodged lithely again and, little by little, edged my way over to Lantz. I was hoping he might buy me enough time to start chanting again, but he was struggling too. It would be one thing if he only had to deal with Rahannim, but he was thrown by the occasional lesser demon casting spells at him from his blind spots.

Gourry too seemed to be having a tough time. Vizea was giving the lesser demons orders in some inhuman language. A few of them, all at once, fired coordinated spells at Gourry. He was able to dodge, but it was a precarious status quo.

“Goliath! Another shockwave!” Vizea called, pointing.

The troll beast, which was no longer in Gourry’s immediate range, nodded once and then took in a deep breath. He was facing Lantz, who already had his hands full with the lesser demons and Rahannim. He didn’t realize what was about to happen!

“Lan—”

I tried to warn our red-haired companion, but Barz took the opportunity to leap at me again. Goliath opened his mouth and—*Bwoosh!*—his body exploded!

“What?!” Vizea cried just as a lesser demon right in front of him turned to light and disappeared. It must have been a high-level exorcism.

“Sorry we’re late,” a man said as he made his entrance.

Damn, talk about dramatic timing...

It was a silver-haired prettyboy wearing a simple white tunic. He had skin made of dark blue stone, but he wasn’t a rock golem—just a man fused with one and a brow daemon against his will. It was the doing of the Red Priest, which was why he’d turned on the so-called saint.

I turned away from the shocked Barz to shoot the newcomer a smile.

“Been a while,” I said. “You’re definitely late, Zelgadis.”

"Tch!" Barz immediately snapped back into action and attacked while my back was turned.

I snorted with laughter and took a single step to the right. The arachnid rushed past me and fell straight into the ground.

"It can't be..." he muttered, trembling and immobile.

He hadn't noticed his other opponent—the cleric casting Raphas Sead. And with that, a quick Monovolt spell from me finished off the spider Barz.

Afterward, a beautiful woman who looked around twenty years old stepped out of the forest. She was dressed in lavender vestments and had long, black hair. I was guessing she must be the head priest's daughter who'd supposedly teamed up with Zel.

"We can save the introductions for later, I suppose," she said, smiling at me. If I were a man, I'm sure I would've fallen head-over-heels right then and there.

Her and Zelgadis's arrival had turned the tables instantly.

"It's over," he proclaimed with an indomitable smile as he stared down our remaining opponents: one lesser demon, Rahannim, and Vizea. "What will you do now? Of course, I have no intention of letting you escape... I prefer to thin out my enemy's forces whenever I have the chance."

"*You* won't let *us* escape?" Vizea said mockingly. "I could say the same to you."

"Bold words. But it'll be difficult to regain the upper hand, don't you think?"

"More like impossible!" I interjected.

The demon nodded in ready agreement, but then said, "If we were the only ones here, perhaps..."

"Are you saying you've got reinforcements on the way?" Zelgadis scoffed. "Don't give me that bluff. I know you're the only pawns Rezo has left in Sairaag."

"That's true. The only *pawns*..." someone replied from behind us.

Yeek! Gourry, Zelgadis, and I all froze up at once. This

new voice was familiar, and hearing it was like having ice water dumped down our backs.

“I’m afraid I’m late,” it continued. “Forgive me, Vizea.”

“Think nothing of it, my lord,” the demon replied with a deep bow.

We all slowly turned back to look, and there he was, a man clad in robes the color of blood...

Rezo the Red Priest.

3: Don't Jump Into Obvious Traps

The first person to speak was the cleric who'd appeared with Zelgadis.

"Rezo!" she cried out.

"Mistress Sylphiel, you've been very rash..." the Red Priest said gently, the metal rings at the end of his staff clinking as he passed it from his left hand to his right. Just like we'd seen in the Vision spell before, this Rezo had a red hood pulled low over his closed eyes. "If you'd remained a peaceable shrine maiden in Sairaag, I'd have had no reason to come after you."

"How dare you! You poisoned my father!" she shouted forcefully.

"A preposterous accusation," he replied with impressive calm.

"You're not..." I whispered.

"Not what?" the Red Priest asked, turning his porcelain features my way.

"You're not Rezo!" I proclaimed, pointing straight at him.

I couldn't deny he had the same aura as the Rezo we'd met before. Something about it seemed off, though.

"Oh?" he asked, arching one eyebrow. He wasn't shaken in the slightest. Rather, he appeared almost amused by my declaration.

"You can't be!" I shouted.

"What an interesting thing to say. However," he began, now pointing his clinking staff at me, "should you wish to challenge my identity, there is another challenge you'll need to overcome first... You'll have to defeat me."

“Not a problem,” I replied without hesitation. “Since you’re not the real Red Priest, I know I can beat you.”

“I see. In that case...” His voice was calm before it surged with sudden hostility, “Why don’t you try?!”

Music to my ears! I immediately started chanting a spell. No one else moved. Not even the man calling himself Rezo, who simply watched me placidly.

“Fireball!”

One Fireball from me would finish most opponents, but even if this man wasn’t the real Rezo, he still aspired to the name. There was no way he’d go down so easy. The idea here was just to size him up.

And yet, as I was chanting, he just stood there silently. He didn’t even bother with a spell of his own. Of course, that was no reason for me to back off.

The ball of light I fired streaked straight toward him!

The Red Priest spoke in an inhuman tongue as he drew a circle in the air with the tip of his staff.

“ㄗ!”

I gasped when I saw it. The ball of light vanished without a trace as it touched the circle he’d outlined.

“Now what?” the Red Priest asked without so much as a hair out of place.

For a moment, I was at a loss for words. Then I heard a chant on the wind—Zelgadis!

“Take this! Goz Vu Row!”

Black shadows raced along the ground from Zelgadis to Rezo. But...

Tunk.

The Red Priest touched the ground with his staff and, with a sound like hot steel plunged into water, the shadows evaporated.

“Now, if I may be so bold...” Rezo said in a somber tone, his staff jangling as he talked. “I would like to unveil a spell: a simple enhanced version of a Mega Brand.”

The spell he was describing would rupture the earth

beneath our feet. Even a dead-on hit was unlikely to be lethal, but I wasn't about to just sit back and take it.

"Over here, everyone! Zel, make with the wind!" I shouted.

"Right!" Zelgadis replied, catching my meaning and immediately setting to a spell.

Eris looked like she was about to flee in terror, but Gourry grabbed her by the neck and pulled her over to the group. Sylphiel set to a spell of her own, and the chanting of four casters, including Rezo, harmonized discordantly in the tense atmosphere.

I finished first, surrounding us with a barrier of wind. Sylphiel's defensive barrier went up next around mine, followed by Zelgadis's which further enhanced its strength.

Still, we weren't done yet. The Mega Brand would come from below, and no matter how powerful our barrier might be, it wouldn't mean jack if the earth swallowed us whole. My plan was to maintain my wind barrier while I cast Levitation on the whole shebang to get us off the ground. If you'll excuse the basic metaphor, it would be like floating in a soap bubble made of wind...

But Rezo's voice suddenly stopped. He'd finished his chant.

Dammit! I'm not ready yet. What a miscalculation! If only I'd left the wind barrier to Zelgadis and gone for Levitation first...

Yet for some reason, the Red Priest wasn't attacking. It was like he was waiting for us to get our defenses in order.

At last, I finished my spell. Timidly, unsteadily, the wind barrier encasing our group lifted off the ground. We slowly ascended into the air... and just as this so-called Rezo was far enough away that I could have blocked him from sight with my index finger, he tapped the ground with his staff.

Not a second later, the earth let out a howl. The ground below us shattered and blasted upward in fragments. Brush was shredded, large trees were torn asunder, and small ones

were sent flying, roots and all. The wave of force along with all its debris slammed into our hovering barrier.

Vizea and Rahannim had disappeared at some point—probably while we were talking to “Rezo.”

Our bubble began shaking like a rough ride in an old carriage.

“Ow!” Lantz cried out.

“What is it?!” Gourry asked.

“Ah, ‘snothing,” Lantz replied, clutching a hand to his forehead. “Just got whacked by a pebble.”

Wait a minute... Is he serious?!

I couldn’t read Zelgadis by his face, but Sylphiel was clearly panicking. It would’ve taken one hell of an attack to break through a barrier like this. This was far more than the “simple enhanced version of Mega Brand” that our so-called Rezo had advertised. It was almost enough to take down a wyvern in flight...

In time, the rumbling stopped and the dust storm slowly settled. The ground in the forest had been upended, revealing a crater of red earth below. At its very center stood a crimson shadow. With a placid expression, “Rezo” looked up at us silently.

“It might be best to withdraw for now...” Sylphiel suggested.

“Yeah...” I agreed with a nod.

There was no way we could handle this guy with three non-spellcasters in tow. Gourry could probably avoid spells on his own, or use the Sword of Light to deflect them, but Lantz and Eris were a problem.

“Where should we go, though? Is there someplace we can hide?” I asked.

“Don’t worry,” Sylphiel said with a smile. “I know the perfect place.”

“The real question’s whether or not he’ll let us make it there...” Zelgadis cut in, glaring down at the Red Priest far below.

Watching him, I could tell how shaken he was inside, likely reliving the terror of our last fight with Rezo. That incredible show of spellcraft just now probably had him wondering if this guy *was* the real deal.

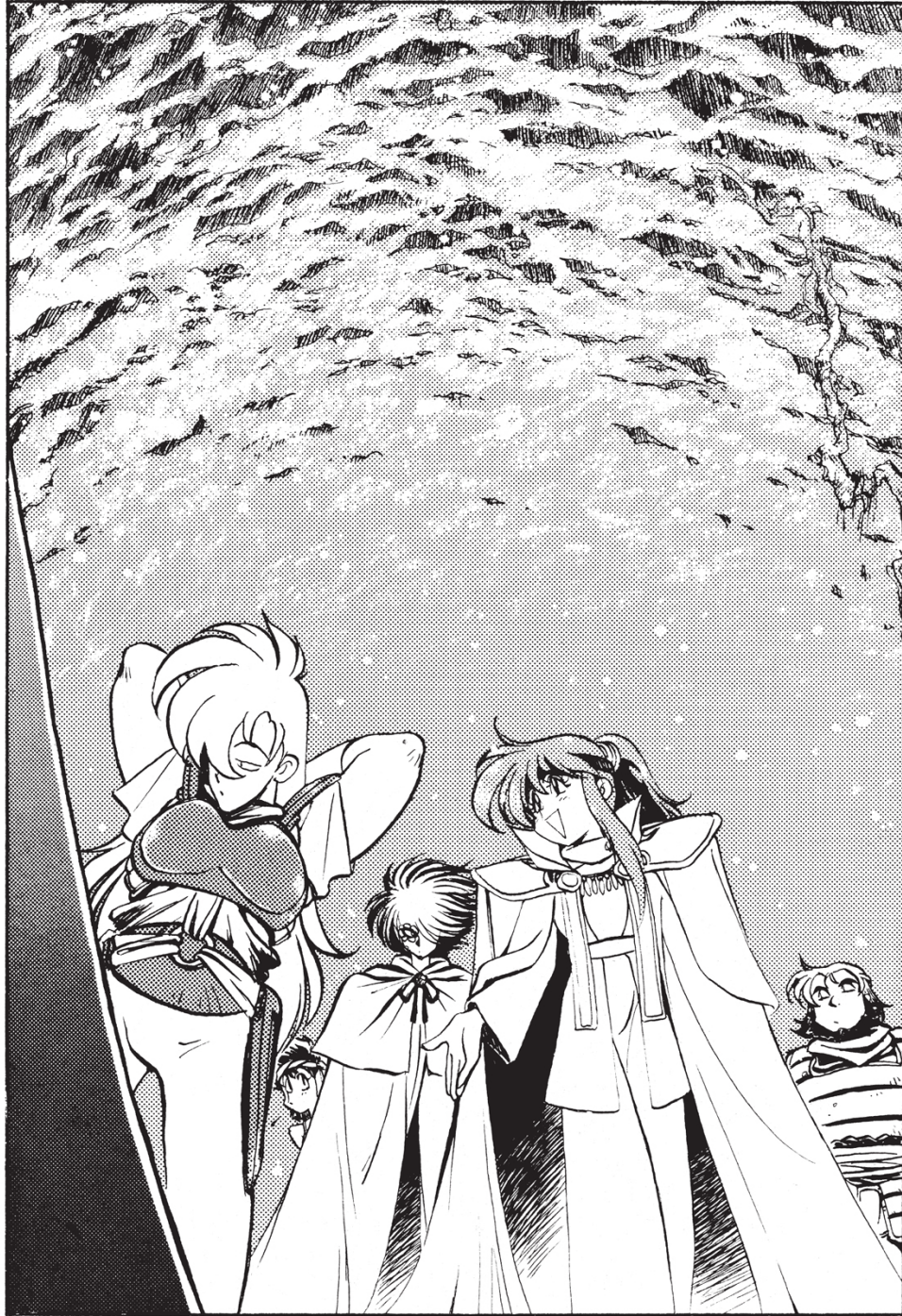
“Welp... we’ll just have to try it and see,” I said, steering our barrier around.

Contrary to all expectation, “Rezo” didn’t pursue, but rather stood there and simply watched us go. I didn’t understand why, but nevertheless, I couldn’t pass up this opportunity to escape. I summoned every bit of power I had to hasten our retreat.

The wind rustled the Red Priest’s hood. Beneath it, for just a second... I thought I caught a glimpse of something crimson in the center of his forehead.

“Huh...” I hummed with interest as I looked around.

We were in a cave the size of a reasonably spacious meeting hall. It was filled with the kind of chill, damp air you’d expect. In fact, it was a typical cave in every way... except between the thick coating of luminescent moss all over the place and the fairy souls flying all around us, it was as bright as day inside. Okay, maybe not *quite*, but it was still pretty bright!



You might not have heard the term “fairy souls” before—they’re more commonly called mock fireflies and stuff like that. They’re little balls of light about the size of your fingertip that live in caves year-round and come out in autumn. When I was a kid, me and my big sister would go around chasing them every fall. If you try to catch one in a net, it’ll just slip right through the weaving. If you catch one with your hands, you won’t feel a thing—and when you open ‘em, it’ll be gone without a trace.

I’ll admit I don’t know if they’re actually the souls of fairies like the name implies. I don’t think even the sorcerers’ council has worked out what they technically are. But if you ask me, what does it matter? They’re harmless and, more importantly, they’re atmospheric.

And here in the hiding place Sylphiel had led us, they were everywhere.

Once we’d left “Rezo” in the dust, we’d entered a cave some distance outside of Sairaag. We’d walked and walked, going this way and that at a dizzying number of forks in the path before finally making it here.

We stopped to catch our breath, then got to chatting. Zelgadis, of all people, opened the conversation.

“Why are you still here?” he asked, turning to Eris, the self-proclaimed bounty hunter extraordinaire, with an annoyed look.

“Shut up. It’s not like I wanted to come along. That man,” she said, pointing at Gourry, “stopped me when I was trying to escape.”

“Well... there was no way you were gonna make it to safety in time,” Gourry said, scratching his head.

“He’s right. You couldn’t have gotten out of there alive by yourself,” Sylphiel added, abruptly taking Gourry’s side.

Eris just pouted grumpily.

When Sylphiel’s eyes met Gourry’s, she bowed to him deeply.

“It has been quite some time, Sir Gourry. Pardon me for

not greeting you properly sooner..."

"Hey, it's no big deal," Gourry said, scratching his head uncertainly.

"Huh? You two know each other?" I asked.

"Sort of," Gourry replied in brief before continuing his conversation with Sylphiel without so much as a glance back at me. "Based on your exchange with Rezo, it sounds like you've come on some hard times. How's your dad?"

"Not well, I'm afraid."

"Her dad? Wait, you mean..." I tried cutting in again.

"You said something about poison?" Gourry asked Sylphiel, completely ignoring me this time.

Grr...

"I believe it was the dried bark of a vidis tree..."

"Hellooo, Gourry!"

"But why would he target your dad?"

Grrrrr! I didn't like this one bit. But... there was someone who liked it even less than me.

"How does everyone here know each other already?!" Lantz asked so loudly that he silenced the rest of the group. "I'm sittin' over here all clueless about what the heck's happenin', and you guys are chummin' it up over old times! Who *are* you people and *what's going on*?! Don't you think you oughta get the rest of us up to speed first?!"

"He's probably right," I conceded, agreeing with Lantz for once.

It turned out that Gourry had gotten to know Sylphiel's father, the high priest of Sairaag, when he'd visited the city before. He'd apparently sorted out a rather difficult incident for him, but since it was unrelated to the current goings-on, Sylphiel didn't share the juicy details. I'd have to ask Gourry about it later.

Now, as far as "Rezo" was concerned, that nonsense started a month ago when he showed up in town with the sorcerer Vrumugun.

The high priest—Sylphiel's father—only knew Rezo by his

reputation as a wandering saint. As such, he'd taken him in warmly. "Borrowing" the names of famous figures whose faces weren't widely known in order to score a night of free food and other hospitality before vanishing into the night was a pretty common con these days. But the high priest was confident that this guy was indeed the real Rezo and claimed to recognize his greatness on sight.

Gee, buddy, if your judgment is that good, how about using it to tell bad apples from good ones, huh? Then we might not be in this mess in the first place!

Not that I could say that in front of Sylphiel... Maybe "Rezo" was just a first-rate actor.

Anyway, sometime after he arrived in the city and made an impression on the locals, he asked to issue the bounty on our heads. The high priest and Sylphiel were surprised, naturally, as they recognized one of the people on the poster—Gourry Gabriev, the city's former savior. The high priest expressed his concerns and explained how they knew Gourry, which warranted a glance between "Rezo" and Vrumugun.

"He said, 'He's under the control of an evil spell cast by this person here,'" Sylphiel recounted as she pointed at my portrait. (The nerve of this guy!) She then paused her story and turned to me. "He said that you had the appearance of a young girl, but that you're actually close to ninety years old... is that true?"

"Hell no! I'm sixteen, dammit!" I shouted.

"Huh? Didn't you say you were fifteen?" Gourry butted in.

"Yeah, and then I had a birthday! Am I not allowed to have those?!"

"Huh..." he mused, seemingly chewing it over.

Why did this so-called Rezo have to go and lie about such pointless things? I hated him even more now! Mark my words, Red Priest! You'll pay for this!

"I see... Pardon me. I didn't think it was really true," Sylphiel said soothingly, perhaps attempting to abate my

fury. "It's just that I'd heard certain rumors about you. People calling you the Bandit Killer and the Black Witch, saying you've destroyed a castle and even committed regicide... It gave me pause at the time. That's all."

Yeah, thanks. That's very comforting...

Anyway, Gourry's predicament was the reason, Rezo alleged, that he wanted us brought in alive.

It was Zelgadis who'd run into trouble first. He'd happened to be close to Sairaag, and his striking appearance combined with the sheer size of the reward made him an ideal target for bounty hunters... Like Eris, for example. But Zelgadis was unwilling to go all-out against an apparent novice, and ended up leading her on a wild goose chase instead. When he heard it was Rezo who'd levied the bounty, however, he made a beeline for Sairaag with Eris hot on his heels.

Me and Gourry would remain blissfully unaware of the whole bounty situation for a while yet, but in the meantime, things were unfolding in the city. First, the high priest started behaving strangely. He turned gaunt and began muttering incomprehensibly to himself. He'd go to see Rezo from time to time and would return seeming satisfied, but his condition would only worsen. Sylphiel, the lead shrine maiden, came to the conclusion that Rezo was poisoning her father somehow. She brought the issue to the other priests for investigation...

But by that time, they were already fully under Rezo's sway. It seemed he'd used his nebulous dark charisma to convert over half of the city into his rabid disciples. Perhaps he'd cast some kind of spell on them. The Red Priest then began summoning strange figures to his side. First humanoid creatures, then demons. Yet nobody objected to his actions.

Sylphiel was left feeling completely isolated and powerless... until the day Zelgadis showed up. They plotted to assassinate "Rezo," but the demon Vizea thwarted them

and they were driven out of Sairaag before they could even reach him. Eris gave chase, but they knocked her out and fled deeper into the forest. That was when they heard an explosion from an attack spell and wondered if, just maybe...

Yup, as expected, that was us.

"I know you guys. There's no way you'd just sit idly by when someone's put a bounty out on you. I figured you'd show up here eventually," Zelgadis explained.

"I'm the biggest victim here," Eris said sulkily. "Why do I have to hang out in this stupid place with you guys?! Even if I catch you and turn you over the Red Priest, he probably wouldn't give me the bounty anyway, given how he was acting back there and what you're saying now. I just want to go home. Where's the way out?"

She stood up, but Zelgadis fixed her with a cold stare.

"Sorry, but you're staying."

"Wh-What?" Eris gawked, taking an intimidated step back.

"You're going to tell them where we are."

"I... I wasn't..."

"No? This place is surrounded by Rezo's henchmen and the townspeople in his thrall. They're all looking for us. If they see you, they'll arrest you, question you... and if you don't talk, they'll torture you. You have no obligation to protect us, and even if you did, they'd break you in minutes."

Eris didn't have a comeback for that one. She just sat back down again, grumbling to herself.

"Where exactly *are* we, anyway? I got turned around so many times on the way..." I asked.

Sylphiel replied with a bright smile, "We're in the heart of Sairaag, inside Flagoon."

"Inside the tree?" I echoed.

"Yes. The original Warrior of Light—Sir Gourry's ancestor from several generations back—fought valiantly against the demon-beast and slew it. After its death, however, its corpse

continued to emit a terrible miasma. And so the warrior planted the seed of a sacred tree gifted to him by the dragons. It purified the miasma, which then nourished it as it grew. The tree is now so large that it stands as a proud symbol of our city."

I knew all of this already, but I figured it was Lantz and Eris's first time hearing the story.

"Huh... I didn't know that," said Gourry, sounding impressed.

I fell silent... The whole group did, in fact.

"You... You..." I was careful to control my voice, even as my face twitched and a protruding vein throbbed in my forehead. "You don't even know your own ancestor's story?"

"Now that you mention it, I think my dad talked about it a lot when I was a kid..." he said, looking troubled. "I guess I never really listened."

So he was like this even as a child...

"A-Anyway..." Sylphiel said, regaining her composure. "The tree's roots run deep under Sairaag, and they formed caves like this one over time. The passageways we followed to get here were also created by the roots of Flagoon."

"And the townspeople, like, don't know we're here?"

"I don't think so," she said with a confident smile. "The townspeople view this tree as sacred. They may know of the caves that run among its roots, but they never enter them. There are no maps of the system either, so even if they searched here, it would take extraordinary luck to stumble upon us. You see, I've enjoyed exploring these caves since I was a child, so I know my way around this tree very, very well."

Sounded like she was quite the tomboy back in the day.

"But... this place is a little big, isn't it?" I said, staring out at the giant open cavern. "Even a tree that's been around for thousands of years shouldn't make caves of this size with its roots. It would've had to have been planted long before the Warrior of Light legend went down..."

“Mistress Lina, you saw the city as we were entering the cave, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I did, but...”

The glimpse I’d gotten of Sairaag made it look like a dense forest surrounded by a large plaza, which was then surrounded by houses. Kind of a donut layout. Wait...

“As I said, Flagoon is the heart of the city... though many mistake it for a forest at first sight.”

“Whaaaaat?!” Lantz and I exclaimed simultaneously.

“Then... Then... Just how old is...”

“This tree thrives on miasma and negative emotions. The greater the miasma that surrounds it, the faster it grows.”

“So it’d die if we cleaned up all the lingering poison from the beast that the warrior slayed?” Lantz asked.

“No. Not as long as people live here,” I answered in Sylphiel’s stead.

She nodded in somber agreement, and Lantz cocked his head.

As long as humans—or, more precisely, as long as creatures with incompatible priorities lived here together—the conflicts between them would sow sorrow and hostility. Such was the fate of all living things. Even the fish I ate for dinner last night had felt fear and despair in the moment it was killed. Those negative emotions were what fed the tree.

“Still, there is one thing that concerns me,” Sylphiel said, lowering her voice to a whisper. “Hush now... Listen closely, would you?”

At her urging, we all fell quiet.

...

It was soft, but I could hear it—a slow, heavy creaking.

“Flagoon is growing. And quite quickly, at that...” She looked to me, then to Gourry, then to Zelgadis. “It’s because Rezo is here. Please tell me... What is he?”

For a time, silence reigned.

I couldn’t possibly tell her the whole truth. She probably wouldn’t believe me, for one thing... and even if she did, it

would do nothing but alarm her. We didn't even know if this Rezo guy was the real deal yet. In fact, my running theory was that he *wasn't*.

"No mere human could emit such hatred and hostility. The human spirit is not a sufficient vessel for the emotions needed to cause Flagoon to grow this rapidly..."

"Well, to be honest, we don't know that answer yet ourselves," Gourry said suddenly in a lighthearted tone.

That was true enough... Was "Rezo" the real thing or an impostor? And if the latter, who was he really and what was he after?

"But whatever he is," Gourry continued, "our only option is to fight him and win."

"Well... that much is true," Sylphiel conceded.

"Okay! So now that we know we have a fight ahead of us, it's time... for food!" I declared, getting an awkward smile out of both Gourry and Zelgadis.

"Hey... doesn't it feel like we've been left out of the conversation?"

"Yeah..."

Behind me, Lantz complained to an unhappy-looking Eris, who was quick to agree with him.

"Food should be readily available," Sylphiel interjected. "There are mushrooms growing a little further ahead. I believe they're edible."

"Lucky break!" I declared, jumping to my feet when I heard that. "Okay, I'm gonna go pick me some mushrooms!"

"Don't you think we should work out a plan first?" asked Zelgadis, professional party pooper.

"Yeah. We need to figure out what to do, and quick," Gourry replied unhelpfully.

"I agree. The mushrooms aren't going anywhere, and Rezo's minions might still attack at any time," Sylphiel added.

"She's right. Get your mind off of food for once," Lantz jeered.

"Yeah, what's with the lack of urgency here?" Eris followed suit.

I went bright red when the whole party turned on me.

"F-Fine! Jeez, everyone's on the same page all of a sudden... Okay, in that case, let's have a strategy meeting. We don't know what Rezo really is. Everyone in the city is against us. We can't send anyone to scout things out since they're more likely to be found than to find anything. And running away just puts us back at square one. So what exactly *should* we do, then? What plan is available to us besides 'wait for the bad guys to come to us'? Any ideas? Anyone? Zelgadis?"

"Huh? Well, when you put it that way..."

"Coming up dry, huh? What about you, Sylphiel?"

"Er, well... um..."

"Okay, then what about—"

Before I could nominate either of them, Lantz and Eris both shook their heads rapidly. Darn it... That just left Gourry.

"Welp... Any bright ideas, big man?"

"Yes, actually," he declared with great confidence.

Oho! The whole group turned to look at him.

"What've you got for us?!" I asked.

Gourry held up a finger and replied, "Let's *all* go pick mushrooms."

I kicked him square in the face.

"Darn it... Why do I have to go along with this?" Eris groaned.

"This is what I get for bein' nice. I never shoulda gotten involved..." Lantz moaned.

"My mistake was being too persistent. If I'd known that pursuing him would get me dragged into this nonsense..."

"It's always demons, man. Can't believe they went and picked a fight with a guy who can control over a dozen lesser demons at once..."

“Ugghhh...”

“Ahhh! Shut up!” I screamed and stopped in the middle of what I was doing. “Lantz! Eris! Enough with the pity party already! Just shut your mouths and pick your mushrooms!”

“You can boss us around all you want, but...”

“Yeah...”

They shared a knowing glance and a nod of agreement.

You... You little...

We’d settled on picking mushrooms as a group, and Sylphiel led the way. The area was bigger than your standard cave, but there was less of the luminescent moss around, so it actually felt darker than before.

“This still feels pathetic,” Zelgadis said, voicing a rare complaint.

“Truly, swordsmen and spellcasters digging for mushrooms... It hardly feels dignified,” Sylphiel agreed.

“Quit your bitching. Oh, hey, Zelgadis...” I said, snagging a mushroom. “I meant to ask earlier, but it slipped my mind. You know Vrumugun—”

“What’s wrong, Eris?”

“Uh, I thought I saw a bug...”

“Hey, Lantz, Eris... Could you kids shut up a while? The grown-ups are talking.”

At my words, they exchanged another look, shrugged, and went back to picking mushrooms. Darn it... I shook my head to clear it, then tried again.

“There’s a sorcerer named Vrumugun with that Rezo wannabe. You heard of him?”

Like I mentioned before, Zelgadis had once worked for the real Rezo, so I thought he might know a thing or two about the sorcerer.

“Oh, that guy,” he said with a groan.

“You know him?”

“Sort of... Have you beaten him a bunch too?”

“So I’m not the only one having that problem?”

“It’s the same pattern every time. This totally

unremarkable-looking guy—except for a ruby embedded in his forehead—shows up and claims he's Vrumugun. You figure it can't really be because you beat him already, but he just keeps coming..."

"So you've killed him a bunch too, huh?"

"Five... No, six times, I think. Once, after making sure he was dead, I burned him to ashes with a Fireball. I then separated his ashes into multiple urns, sealed them, then threw some in the river and buried the rest..."

"Wow... overkill, much?"

"When someone proves that hard to kill permanently, it's not out of the question that he could be undead."

Fair point. Lower-class undead like zombies were one thing, but powerful creatures like vampires demanded extraordinary measures. What Zelgadis was describing was the only way to make sure they wouldn't climb right back out of their graves... and even then, if someone managed to gather up the ashes and perform the right ritual, you could still end up with vampire redux. The only way to be rid of them forever was to use purification magic to get them to ascend, or to uproot them from the astral plane like you did with demons.

"So he still came back after all that, did he?" I asked.

"Yeah. But to answer your original question, in my time with Rezo... Vrumugun did come up once."

"Yeah?"

"I was running my mouth about something or other and Rezo said to me, 'Don't get cocky. I have two others working for me who are more skilled with magic than you.'"

"One of them being Vrumugun?"

"Yeah. The way he said it really riled me. I asked how powerful the guy was, but Rezo wouldn't tell me... Thinking back now, I bet that's when he realized I was gonna try to kill him someday."

"And who was the other person?"

"He wouldn't say."

"Hmm, okay." I filed that info away and adjusted my theory. "So, before this all happened, you'd never met Vrumugun in person?"

"Nope."

"Which means the guy we've been fighting all this time might not necessarily be the real one," I speculated, at last starting to get a picture of the sorcerer in my mind.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, think about Vrumugun's description: a sorcerer of average height and build who wears the kind of black cape you could pull out of a bargain bin in any podunk town. He's so lacking in distinguishing characteristics otherwise that you gotta wonder if it's intentional... except for the ruby in his forehead."

"Aha, I see." Zelgadis quickly seemed to grasp what I was getting at. "The rubies..."

"Yeah, the rubies."

"You wanna clue the rest of us in?" a disgruntled Lantz suddenly piped up.

I looked over and realized that everyone in the group had started listening in at some point.

"Okay, here's the deal." I cleared my throat. "I'm thinking the Vrumuguns we've been beating are all fakes. The real one is somewhere else, controlling them through the rubies in their foreheads."

"What, you can do that?" Lantz asked.

"Sure can," I answered confidently.

There's a spell called Marionette; it's a little black magic number where you stick something on a person's body and hold a days-long ritual to make them obey your every command. If you can break the caster's concentration long enough, the puppet should return to normal... but if a skilled caster stored up their magic power in something like a ruby on their own forehead, you might get a more permanent situation. Rezo had apparently told Zelgadis once that Vrumugun was skilled with magic, but that didn't

necessarily mean offensive magic.

"When I fought the first sorcerer who called himself Vrumugun... to be honest, he struck me as a total hack. Even when controlled by a sorcerer as powerful as the real Vrumugun, the puppets are likely limited by their individual capacity. He probably also intentionally made the 'fakes' nondescript so that we'd think all the Vrumuguns he sent after us were the same person."

"But then where's the real Vrumugun?" Eris asked.

"This is still just a guess, but... the real Vrumugun might have a ruby embedded in his own body to control all the fakes. And what do you know? I just so happened to see in our little tussle that there was something red stuck on the forehead of everyone's favorite Rezo impersonator. So we have a man calling himself Rezo—who we know is dead—and we have a sorcerer named Vrumugun who none of us have ever seen before. The most simple hypothesis is..."

"That he's the real Vrumugun?" asked the simple Gourry.

The smell of cooked mushrooms hung in the cave filled with pale light.

"But this doesn't solve the main problem," said Lantz, biting into one I'd roasted with a fire spell. "How do we beat 'im?"

It was a good question. All we'd done so far was speculate about Vrumugun's true identity and pick mushrooms. Basically, we'd accomplished nothing.

"The *real* issue," Zelgadis said while eyeing Lantz and Eris, "is how we're going to get any use out of these two."

"Hey..." Lantz glared at Zel angrily. "Are you sayin' we're useless?"

"It's not like I came along to make myself useful..." Eris, for her part, owned it.

"That's exactly what I'm saying, yeah. Up against demons, you're going to be useless. Are you really going to argue otherwise after your contributions in the last battle?"

Lantz fell silent in the face of harsh truth, served courtesy of Zel. See, he, Sylphiel, and I could all use magic, and Gourry had the Sword of Light. The main thing holding Lantz back in the last fight was the fact that he didn't have either.

"Don't worry! You can make up for it with sheer guts!" I said to cheer him up.

"Yeah, right. Liar," he said, still slumped over.

"No, I'm serious. Didn't you know?" I said simply.

"Are you yankin' my chain?" he asked, looking up to eye me suspiciously.

"Of course not. Demons exist primarily on the astral plane, see? That's why cutting or burning them here on the material plane doesn't do much. You know how you can't kill a person by insulting them hard enough? Conversely, if you want to kill a demon, it's their spirit you have to strike at.

"So the second you hit a demon with your sword, you gotta think really hard, like, 'Die, die, die!' If the power of your will, channeled through your sword, is superior to the demon's spiritual power, you can hurt them that way. That's why silver weapons are effective against ghosts and stuff—silver is a better conduit for willpower than steel. And Gourry's Sword of Light over there creates its blade by amplifying all kinds of power, including human will."

"Oh, really?" Gourry said in wonderment as he gazed down at the sword on his belt. Knowing him, he probably just thought of it as "a pretty cool sword that works somehow."

"Which means he just needs something to amplify his will!" Sylphiel interjected, clapping her hands together.

"Yeah... If you wanna break it down, I guess so," I admitted.

"Then I have just the trick!" she declared.

"You do?!" Lantz shouted, suddenly all fired up.

"Yes. Long ago, a sword was discovered inside Flagoon. It was said to be a sacred weapon, an extension of the tree that was always resonating with it, giving it the ability to

purify and amplify the spirit of its wielder. It was stored in the city's temple, but..."

"Don't tell me it's gone missing!"

"Well... when I was very little, I sneaked it out and hid it in these caves as a prank."

Come on...

"Didn't that cause a huge panic or something?"

"It certainly did," she said evenly. "But at the time, I couldn't understand why the adults were all in such a tizzy, and in the end, it's worked out in our favor. It was just a child's mischief, after all."

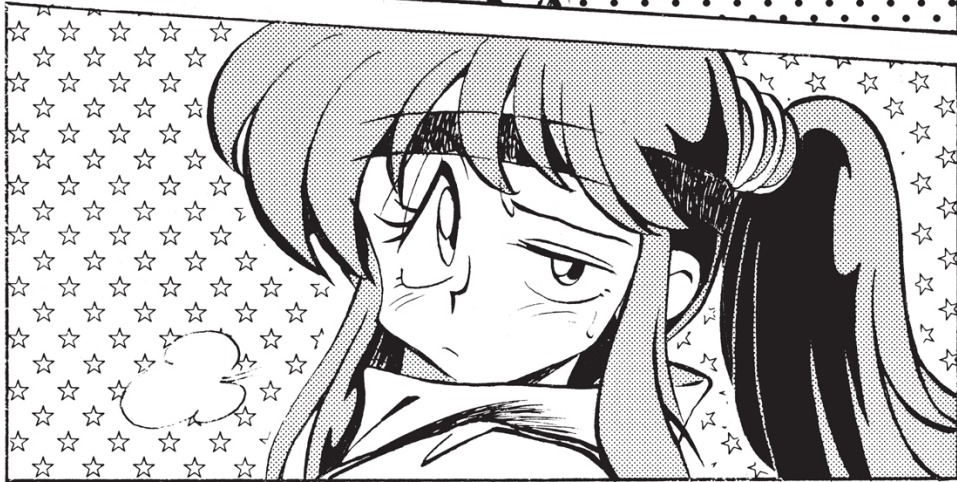
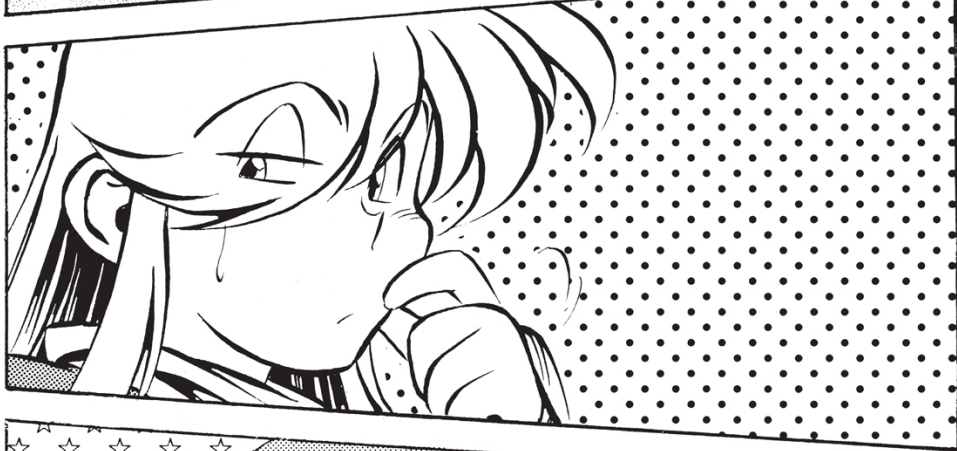
Wow, she's got a personality on her, huh? She almost had me fooled with that whole good-girl facade...

"Okay, then let's all go fetch that puppy!"

"Absolutely not," Sylphiel declared, rising to her feet as she flatly quashed my forceful pitch. Talk about a wet blanket. "The way is narrow with many forked paths and very little of the luminescent moss to guide us. If we go in a large group, we might get separated. It would be best if I went alone with a single companion... Hmm, Sir Gourry, would you accompany me? The rest of you can remain here, of course."

"Me?" Gourry asked, glancing in my direction for some reason.

Was it just me, or did Sylphiel have a crush on this guy? Well, there's no accounting for taste...



"We really should be going, then. And as quickly as possible," Sylphiel urged.

Gourry hefted himself up sluggishly, then patted me on the shoulder where I sat next to him.

"Don't do anything crazy while I'm gone, okay?"

"I'll be fine. Trust me."

"I can't remember the last time *that* worked out well for me, but sure."

...

"Anyway, we're heading out now. We'll be back as soon as we can, okay?" Gourry said, shooting me an awkward wink before following after Sylphiel.

Once they were gone, the rest of us polished off the mushrooms and suddenly found ourselves with nothing to do.

"So, what now?" Eris asked, yawning.

"G-Good question..." Lantz sank deep into thought, with the occasional surreptitious glance at her legs.

"What else? We wait. Taking reckless action now would only get us killed," Zelgadis said bluntly.

"But we should at least think up some kind of plan..."

"Lina was right before. Our only course of action now is to wait for the enemy to come to us. The reason Rezo put that 'captured alive' provision on our bounty is probably because he wants to kill us himself. He'll come for us, sooner or later... likely with as few subordinates as possible so that the townspeople don't get in his way. Doing anything other than sitting tight would just be wasted effort."

"If you're tired of waiting, there's one thing we *can* do," I suggested.

"Whazzat?" Lantz asked.

I raised an emphatic finger and declared, "Pick more mushrooms!"

"She got our hopes up there..." Eris whined.

"Go figure it's more mushrooms..." Lantz snarked.

The three of us had gone to gather a second helping.

"Oh, shut up. You know we need as much food as we can get, right? And if you don't wanna pick mushrooms, you could've said no like Zelgadis did!"

"Well..."

"I figured it'd be better than just sitting around..."

"But it's still pretty boring..."

"So we're gonna ditch!"

"Have fun!"

The two of them split on me, running back in the direction we'd come from.

...

"After I was nice enough to invite you guys along with me? Hmph! Fine, whatever! See if you get any of *my* mushrooms!" I grumbled, gathering all the while.

Don't call me a glutton, okay? I'm a growing girl here. I need my calories!

"Kids these days, I tell you! Wait, I'm a kid these days... Huh?"

My grumbling was cut short when I felt a presence behind me and quickly turned around to see who it was.

"Lantz!" I cried out, standing up as the mushrooms I'd been holding in my cape spilled to the ground.

He was standing with his right hand against the wall, as if unsteady on his feet. Had he been injured? He was covering his left eye and his forehead with his other hand, his expression one of pain.

"What happened?!" I called, running over to him in a panic. A foreboding chill ran up my spine.

"It's them..." he hissed.

"Where?!"

I leaned forward—but another chill ran up my spine and I instinctively drew away. Not a second later, I felt a burning pain in my abdomen just to the left of my navel.

Wh... What?!

I quickly pulled away, leaning my back against the wall as

I felt a scream wither in my throat. Lantz was holding a bloody knife in one hand. There was a slight smile on his face... and a shining red ruby embedded in his forehead.

"That's right. It's me..." said a voice from the opposite direction. Eris had gotten behind me at some point. She was smiling just like Lantz, and had an identical ruby embedded just below her bandanna. She was also holding a large knife.

"Me, Vrumugun!" Lantz declared, cackling.

The wound he'd put in my stomach throbbed with searing pain. This much bleeding wasn't going to stop on its own...

"Yeek!"

Lantz took another slash at me and I dodged with a light step... at least, that was the plan, but I immediately staggered and lost my footing. I still managed to dodge the attack, but the initial stab wound had taken a greater toll on me than I'd realized. It was starting to show in my reaction time.

If I didn't take these two out quickly, things were gonna get ugly for me. Still, I couldn't just kill people who were being controlled...

I kept a careful eye on them as they crept closer, and simultaneously began chanting a quiet Sleeping spell.

"Not gonna happen!" Lantz cried as he lunged.

I managed to dodge again, but it forced me to cut off my chant. I tried to pick it back up, but—

Blugh!

I felt a hot lump of something welling deep in my throat.

Okay... super not good...

"Looks like it's the end for you," Eris said with a thin smile. "That got you right in the gut. You won't be chanting any spells while you're spitting up blood."

Sh-Shut up! I screamed internally. If I lost consciousness now, it really would be the end for me.

I reached behind me with my left hand and drew my shortsword. As Lantz approached confidently, I swung it as hard as I could.

“...Guh!”

Pain shot through my arm. My hand trembled for a moment, and my sword slipped from my grasp. It grazed Lantz’s side and echoed loudly as it clattered deeper into the cave.

“You’re a determined little thing, Lina Inverse. Just give it up and let Vrumugun kill you!”

Eris, who’d nailed my sword arm with a small rock, leisurely readied her knife and moved in on me too. I took a trembling step back. My knees buckled. I lost my balance and tumbled over.

I can’t get back up! That was my last thought before everything went black.

The next thing I knew, I was surrounded by light. There were yammering shadows all around me.

Shut up already... I tried to whisper, but all that came out was a cough.

One of the shadows peered into my face and said something. I think I understood. It seemed to be telling me not to try to talk.

It was then that I realized I could barely see anything. I kept my unfocused eyes closed for a while, then, after a time, slowly opened them again. When I did, the silhouettes around me gradually took their proper shapes.

Sylphiel?

Her eyes were closed and she was fervently chanting a spell—Resurrection. The name wasn’t quite accurate as it didn’t actually bring anyone back to life. Dead is dead, after all.

You might be familiar with an inferior version of the spell, Recovery, that all priests and most traveling sorcerers knew. That included me. There were some warriors, bards, and even peddlers who had it in their repertoire too. Anyone could learn it from their local church in exchange for a little donation.

But Recovery simply sped up natural healing, which meant the injured person's stamina still played a vital role in the process. What Sylphiel was doing, however, was pulling power from the surrounding area and channeling it into my body using herself as a medium. Thus with Resurrection, you could heal someone beyond what they could ever heal on their own. If used by a high-level caster in tandem with other spells, it could even regenerate lost arms and legs.

The fact that she was casting it made it crystal clear what a close call I'd just had.

"You awake, Lina? You okay? It doesn't hurt too much, does it?" called my self-styled guardian, Gourry, in a worried voice.

I gave him a firm nod.

Behind me, Zelgadis was watching on silently. Lantz and Eris were further behind him, the rubies now gone from their foreheads. Lantz looked like he wanted to cry, and even Eris looked despondent.



I didn't know exactly what had happened, but one way or another, it seemed I was safe.

"A little while after you guys left, I heard the sound of clashing steel," Zelgadis explained as he continued to watch over me. "At first I thought it was just my imagination, but my stomach wouldn't stop churning... So I came to have a look, and found those two with rubies in their foreheads and you on the ground. I quickly knocked them both out and tied them up so they couldn't move... but you were already grievously injured. I didn't know what to do. Fortunately, Gourry and Sylphiel returned sooner than I expected."

Apparently the racket my sword made when I dropped it had brought Zel running.

Huh? But in that case... Wait a minute...

"Lantz and Eris both remember getting really sleepy... and then nothing until Sylphiel removed the rubies from their foreheads."

"I was worried about you," Gourry said gently.

"Mm..." I gave him a small smile.

"Sorry..." Lantz said from the back of the group in a truly tortured voice.

Still smiling, I waved him off. This wasn't his fault. The real villain here was Vrumugun, putting that ruby in his forehead and controlling him like a puppet!

After that, the room was silent, save Sylphiel's chanting, which continued to echo throughout the cave. With nothing better to do, I just let my gaze wander until my eyes landed on a sword Gourry was holding.

"Is that...?" I started to ask, the words slipping from my lips.

"It seems you've recovered enough to talk now," Sylphiel said with a sigh as she temporarily paused her chant. "But try not to do too much of it. As for the sword... Indeed, that is the sacred weapon birthed from Flagoon. We call it the Bless Blade, and—"

"Explanations later," Zelgadis said, his tone as

businesslike as ever. "Our first priority is Lina's recovery. If Vrumugun knows we're here, it's only a matter of time before his buddies come running. So once she's mobile, we get out of here ASAP."

"Now, I can't have that," called a voice from far away. It was muffled from the cave's echo, but it was unmistakably him—Rezo! "Can you hear me? I hear your voices, but the echo makes it so hard to trace them... I don't feel much like searching you out, so I'm going to forge a path to you. Do be careful, as this might be dangerous."

A moment of silence followed.

"Get down!" Gourry then shouted, sensing whatever was incoming.

Everyone hit the dirt, and in that same instant, a light far brighter than the luminescent moss pierced through the dome-shaped cavern where we were huddled.

I knew it. This confirmed all of my suspicions.

I looked up and saw a hole big enough for a human—no, one big enough even for a cyclops to pass through without ducking—had formed right nearby. Gourry stood up to look at it.

"Lantz!" he then called, tossing our red-headed friend the Bless Blade.

Lantz looked back at him questioningly.

"We're going up. Keep Lina safe."

Lantz stared at him for a while, but finally gave him a firm nod and replied, "I will."

"Let's go, Gourry," Zelgadis called like he was inviting him on a fishing trip.

With his naked broadsword in hand, he turned around and unceremoniously walked through the freshly opened hole.

"Later," he said, waving back with his free hand without turning around.

"All right. Let's give it our best shot," Gourry said as he took his place next to Zel.

A troll that suddenly appeared ahead of them took a slash

from Gourry's sword, while yet another was smashed to pieces by Zel's attack magic. Both boys then disappeared deeper into the hole. The sounds of swords clashing gradually moved farther and farther away.

"Mistress Sylphiel," Lantz said. "Keep healin' Lina. Once she can move again, we'll head out and join them."

"It will take a bit more time. Please be patient," she said with an agreeable nod.

"Oh, I know," said Eris next. "Sorry, but I think I'm gonna take this chance to make tracks. I'd just hold you guys back anyway, so..."

"Eris!" She was about to rise, but my forceful call stopped her. "Don't go yet. There's a chance they'll kill you anyway."

"B-But..."

"Don't go," I insisted.

"Yeah, I'm with Lina on this one," Lantz agreed.

And with that, Eris finally relented and slumped over again. I let out a sigh, then gazed toward the hole that Gourry and Zelgadis had just departed through.

"I hope those two... are all right..."

"You should reserve such concern for yourself."

We all turned at the sound of the new voice to see the likeness of a man in black standing there—it was Vizea.

"Pardon the intrusion, but this seems a prime opportunity to finish you off."

"Not... happening..." I groaned.

I tried to sit up, but I was suddenly awash with a powerful lethargy. My body failed to respond, even though the pain had finally subsided...

"You're not ready yet," Sylphiel warned me.

"Lantz... sorry, but can you buy me some time? Please. At least until I'm recovered..."

"Sure thing," he responded.

He then stood up with the Bless Blade in hand. The light of determination was shining in his eyes.

"I won't let him lay one finger on you. I owe you big

time... and I promised Bro. This guy,” he said firmly, leveling his sword at the demon, “is going down!”

4: The Windswept City of the Dead

"My, how brave of you," Vizea said with an air of absolute condescension. It was clear the idea of losing to some pathetic human warrior was unthinkable to him.

"Lantz!" I called. "You can beat him! Just wait until he lets his guard down, then hit him with your spirit!"

"Hmm, sound advice... if only it weren't utter nonsense."

Shut up, jerk.

Like, yeah, I know. It would've been one thing if we'd ambushed the guy, but there was no way he was gonna let his guard down walking into a duel with eyes wide open. The only way for Lantz to win like this was if the willpower he channeled through the Bless Blade could outstrip Vizea's spiritual defenses entirely. And to put it bluntly, Lantz's will was pretty weak.

I mean, obviously he had more than your average person off the street; but in a lineup of giant badasses, he ranked about a "meh" on the willpower meter. I didn't know exactly how mighty the Bless Blade was, but if Lantz couldn't overpower Vizea even with its aid...

"You cannot defeat me, no matter how you might struggle."

"You sure about that?" Lantz asked, a smile spreading across his face.

"You're welcome to try me and find out for yourself. I need to put you down quickly so that I can deal with the others, after all."

"Happy to oblige!" Lantz shouted, taking off in a run. Countless white whips lashed at him from the right half of

Vizea's face. "Tch!"

The Bless Blade flashed through the air, sweeping them all away... while Lantz continued charging the demon!

"Oho..." Vizea leaped high into the air and latched on to the ceiling like a giant spider. "It seems I underestimated you. You may yet provide some entertainment."

"I don't think you're gonna find this very fun, buddy."

"Is that so?"

Vizea suddenly plunged headlong at Lantz, more white whips lashing from his face.

"Bwugh!" Lantz was forced to leap back. Vizea's flesh-tentacles burrowed deep into the ground as he landed.

"Dammit! This ain't goin' anywhere! It's just back an' forth!"

"Hardly," Vizea said.

And just then... the earth erupted beneath Lantz!

"Huh?!"

It was the tentacles Vizea had shot into the ground. Dozens of them burst up at Lantz's feet, forcing him to jump into the air to avoid them. One, however, still managed to spear his calf.

"Guh!"

He hurriedly cut through it with his sword. But even once it was severed, the tentacle continued to wriggle in his flesh.

"Dammit! Die already!"

He swung the Bless Blade again, partly in panic. And the moment it made contact this time, the tentacle writhing in his leg let out an unsettling squeal and evaporated. It seemed Lantz's will was growing. At this rate... he might just...

"What's wrong? You appear to be struggling," Vizea said just before a wall to Lantz's side erupted with more tentacles.

Okay, it's irrelevant in the grand scheme of things, but I gotta say... there was something kind of gross about Vizea's whole deal. I wouldn't be eating pasta for a while.

Lantz sliced through every one of the incoming noodles.

At least, *almost* every one.

“Guh!”

Lantz’s sword arm came to a sudden halt and then slowly creaked toward the demon. At some point, Vizea had roped the Bless Blade with a single tentacle from his face.

“I see it was a mistake to toy with you. I need to be rid of that annoying thing now.” As he spoke, a faint creaking echoed through the cave. It was coming from the tree. Vizea looked around suspiciously for a moment, but his gaze swiftly returned to Lantz. “That appears to be... a very sturdy blade indeed. My tentacles could snap most magic swords with ease.”

But not this one, pal! As Sylphiel had explained, the Bless Blade was a reflection of Flagoon. In order to break it, you’d need to be able to break the tree itself—and not even a demon like Vizea had that kind of power.

“Well... if it won’t break, I’ll simply take it.”

A new white tentacle lashed out at Lantz. He grunted, and though he stumbled a few steps, he managed to avoid falling over. Still, Vizea was pulling the sword closer and closer... and Lantz right along with it.

“D... Dammit!”

There, the sword suddenly slipped Lantz’s hands. The recoil sent the demon falling backward.

“Now!”

In that instant, Lantz charged forward and snatched the sword from Vizea’s slack tentacle. He then kept charging until he was right in the demon’s face.

Wham! The Bless Blade pierced through Vizea’s stomach.

“Die!”

Lantz’s scream echoed through the cavern, followed by a shriek from Vizea.

“Gh... Nnngh...” the demon groaned, slowly raising one hand. He’d survived the attack!

“Dammit! Come on! Get outta there!” Lantz cried desperately, struggling to remove the sword from the

demon's gut. And just as Vizea's raised right hand twitched with movement, Lantz shouted even louder, "Dammit! Die!"

"Gah!" Vizea reeled back.

Lantz quickly leaped away, leaving the sword in the demon's midsection.

"Guh... hugh... huhh..." Even through his labored breathing, a vicious smile appeared on the demon's face. "You hurt me... You did indeed manage to hurt me just now..."

He began walking unsteadily toward Lantz, who took an intimidated step back. The demon then spread his arms wide, as if offering up the sword still stuck in its torso.

"You left this. Why don't you take it back?" he invited.

Lantz continued to creep back, terrified of the demon.

"Well? What's wrong?" Vizea asked, slowly closing in on him.

Without the Bless Blade, Lantz was powerless against the demon—and the demon knew it. Vizea was keenly aware that the only way Lantz could defeat him was to make contact with the blade currently piercing his stomach and channel all the spirit he had into it. But Lantz would have to charge in in order to do that, and Vizea was waiting for just that moment. If Vizea could land a hit before Lantz could channel his spirit, it would be game over for our fighter friend. Same story if Vizea could hold out against whatever spiritual attack Lantz could muster. The odds were against him, no matter how you sliced it.

Lantz continued to creep back until he was flat against a wall—the luminescent moss-covered interior of the trunk. The second he touched it, shining spores took flight.

"Now have at me!" Vizea cried in triumph, when—

"Die! You monster!" Lantz howled.

In that moment, part of the demon's stomach ruptured.

"What...?" Vizea crumpled to the ground, looking unsure of what was happening to his own body.

Instead of blood, a yellow substance like powdered

cheese flowed from the wound in his torso. Before long, he lay perfectly still.

Vzzt... Then, with a sound like small winged insects scattering, his corpse turned to dust, leaving only the Bless Blade behind.

Vizea had let his guard down after all. Then Lantz had channeled his spirit into Flagoon itself, and the sword, resonating with it, had obliterated the demon.

I tossed a glance in the opposite direction from all the action.

“What’s wrong, Eris? You look distracted.”

Yeah, I have a pretty nasty temperament sometimes.

“I, uh, it’s just... I never knew demons looked like that when they died...” she responded, as abashed as I’d expected.

“Hah!”

With a flash of the Sword of Light, Gourry cut a brass demon in half. The battle was more or less decided at this point.

I’d left Flagoon through the hole that “Rezo” had opened, stepping out into Sairaag City. We were currently in the rather large plaza around the tree. Nearby were shops of various sizes and a considerable crowd of people that had gathered to watch the fight.

Lucky them. Must’ve been nice just to stand back and watch while our boys had their hands full...

“You’re all... going to pay...” Rahannim said languidly from the air as he set his sights on Zelgadis.

“Be careful, Zelgadis!” Gourry shouted as the fishman vanished.

Zelgadis gasped, then dodged purely on instinct. A sharp gale brushed by his face.

“Oho?” He licked his lips with interest.

Though his cheek was solid rock, Rahannim’s attack had actually managed to draw blood.

“He gave us a lot of trouble too! Be careful!”

Hearing Gourry’s warning, Zelgadis wrinkled his nose in disbelief.

“Trouble? That pathetic creature gave you and Lina trouble?”

“Pathetic?! Come on! He moves too fast to hit him!”

“Even so... I can take care of him easily.” With those bold words, Zelgadis thrust his sword up toward Rahannim, who was looming in the air overhead again. “Come at me, you stupid fish. I’ll make fillets out of you.”

“Try it... if you wish...”

The fish’s tail snapped, and he disappeared again. The instant he did, Zelgadis moved. He held his sword fast overhead, shifted his weight forward, and lowered his hips.

Hey, come to think of it...

There was a quiet thunk, and Zelgadis’s body lurched backward. Rahannim fell to the ground behind him in two perfect slices.

It was true that the fishman moved faster than the naked eye could perceive, but his reaction time remained unremarkable. That was why he was so easy to dodge if you waited until he was already charging... and why he couldn’t alter his course to evade Zelgadis’s stationary sword.

In other words... dude killed himself. It was all pretty stupid, really.

“See?” Zelgadis smirked.

Gourry simply gaped.

“Hey, how’s the wound?” Zelgadis called and waved once he noticed our arrival.

“Better!” I shouted, waving back.

“Lina!” Gourry exclaimed when he finally noticed too. “All healed up?”

“Yeah! I’m in tip-top shape!” I answered with a firm nod.

“How long have you been watching us?” Zelgadis asked with a wry smile.

“Since the start of the fight with Rahannim.”

I'd recovered pretty soon after Lantz polished off Vizea, and we'd then set about tending to his wounds. Once we were done, we—me, Lantz, Sylphiel, and Eris—ran off to catch up with the boys.

"Vrumugun showed up too, but we killed him again. No sign yet of that half-faced demon," Zelgadis explained.

"Oh, actually, Lantz took care of him," I corrected.

"*Lantz* did?!" they both exclaimed in surprise.

Lantz shot them a wink and a thumbs up.

"Then that just leaves..."

Zelgadis cast his eyes over the corpses of berserkers and trolls scattered around us, eventually turning to the unflappable red-clad figure standing not far away.

"Him... I guess," he whispered with a tone not unlike despair.

I, however, quietly drew my shortsword and pressed it against the back of our real opponent...

"No, I think it's time we end the farce. Don't you agree, *Eris Vrumugun*?"

"What?!"

"What are you talking about, Lina?"

The rest of the group turned toward the two of us.

"How long have you known?" she asked.

I thought she might try to play dumb for a while, but she didn't deny my accusation. In a smooth motion, she reached for the knife on her belt...

"I wouldn't if I were you," I warned.

But she ignored me, pulling her knife from its sheath and tossing it aside. A little anticlimactic, if I'm being totally honest.

"Zelgadis, keep an eye on 'Rezo' over there. Signal me if he tries anything. Now, as for you... I got my first whiff of funny business when you and Lantz attacked me in the cave."

"Oh? How's that?" She shoved her hands into her pockets and slowly turned to face me, her manner casually defiant.

“When the sword slipped from my hand, Zelgadis overheard it and came running... So why didn’t Vrumugun try to stop him on the way? If he’d cast Sleeping on you two and put those rubies on your foreheads, he had to be nearby. All he had to do was stall Zelgadis and it would’ve been curtains for me. He didn’t have to fight him, even. A single attack spell from a distance could’ve held him off long enough to do the job. So why didn’t he bother?”

“It all suggests that Vrumugun was in that tunnel when he performed the Marionette spell but not when Zel came running. Either he’d escaped through some other way, or he was really one of the two of you. And seeing as I knew Lantz from before all this...”

“Here,” Eris said, pointing to the place between her brows where the control ruby had been implanted. “This is the wrong spot. Embedding a ruby here won’t do anything. You need to put it a little higher, like the one I set on Lantz. The plan was to slap one on myself and pretend to be controlled so as to deflect suspicion... The master ruby is embedded inside my body, so you’d never find it even if you removed my bandanna. And as for that guy... all I had to do was cast a little Sleeping spell. He never even saw it coming. The absolute fool.”

“What?!”

Ignoring Lantz’s indignant interjection, Eris kept her attention on me.

“So, what really gave me away in the end?” she asked casually.

“It was ‘Rezo’ breaking into Flagoon with his magic. If Vrumugun had found us and then escaped back outside, he easily could’ve led him to us. Plus, his aim was way too precise. There was no way he could’ve pinpointed our location between the winding caves and that crazy echo... That is, unless one of us was tuned to his wavelength.” I used my free hand to point at the Red Priest, who was still standing there quietly. “You have a ruby on his forehead to

control him too, right? That copy of Rezo the Red.”

I wasn’t sure why, but Eris’s only response was a smirk. I kept pressing.

“Now that I think back on it, there were other signs. When that spider guy wanted to eat you, ‘Vrumugun’ got really protective... I guess you hadn’t revealed your true identity even to your own comrades, huh?”

“The name Erisiel Vrumugun doesn’t exactly bring the minions running,” she said with a brazen smile. “So I put a ruby on the forehead of that mindless copy to gather henchmen in Lord Rezo’s name.”

With that, she cast an almost resentful glare at the so-called Rezo standing nearby.

“You’re aware of Lord Rezo’s blindness, I’m sure. He made that homunculus of himself to use as a guinea pig for testing cures. It has tremendous capacity, but it’s useless and mindless outside of my control.

“Yet no matter how many henchmen I sent after you, you lot just kept on slipping through their fingers... So I pretended to be a mere bounty hunter, found Zelgadis first, and tailed him. Him knocking me out in the forest and running into the rest of you certainly wasn’t part of the plan... but if that man Gourry hadn’t caught me, I would have blown you all away with my puppet’s attack.”

“You want to be a bigshot that badly? The sorcerer who surpassed Rezo the Red?” Zelgadis asked, still keeping an eye on “Rezo.”

“Partly. But more than anything, I...” she said, trailing off with a distant gaze. “I loved him... the real Lord Rezo.”

Wha... Her words knocked me for a loop.

And in my moment of pause, her hand moved inside of her pocket. She then pulled something out and flicked it at me with her thumb—a control ruby!

Clink! It hit me square in the forehead.

“What the...”

Those confused words weren’t mine; they were Eris’s. Her

ruby had bounced right off me and fallen at my feet.

"Sorry," I said, flashing a wicked grin as I pointed to my forehead with my left hand. "Special bandanna."

It was woven from the whiskers of a black dragon and had a small jeweled amulet woven into the lining. It was positioned at the center of my forehead to help focus my spirit when I chanted, but I was pretty sure it was tough enough to stop a sword swing—one from a third-rate warrior, at least. Not that I'd ever be stupid enough to put that to the test.

"Jig's up, Eris. Just give yourself up and lift the bounty on our heads."

"Hah!"

With faster movements than I'd expected, she leaped away from the group.

Dammit, Gourry! Lantz! Get on the ball!

"This isn't over yet! To me, my puppet!"

The red darkness moved, responding to her call—the call of the sorcerer Erisiel Vrumugun.

Why do bad guys always have to be so stubborn? If she insisted on a fight, I'd take her. It might make things more complicated when it came to lifting the bounties on our heads, but it was the fastest way to end this.

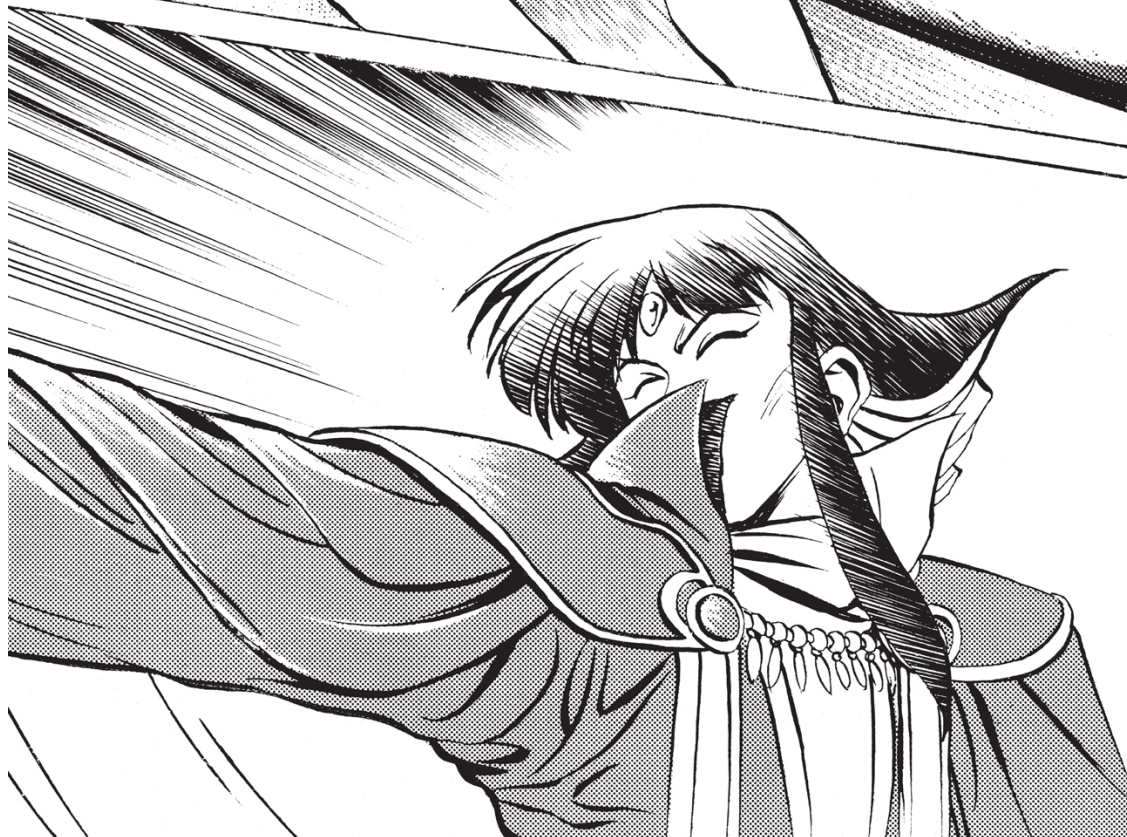
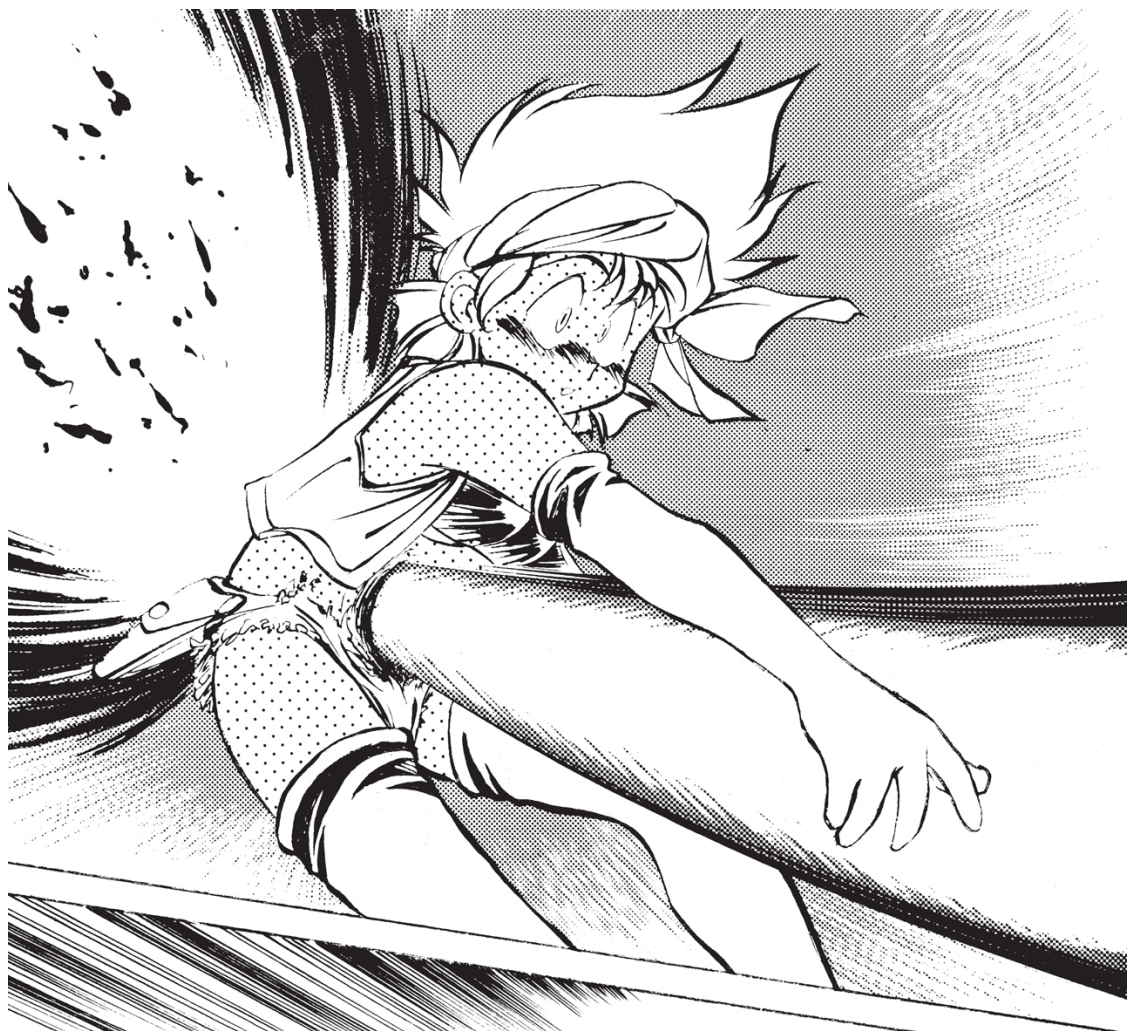
Rezo's copy silently took up a position behind Eris and a little to her side. The staff in his hand jangled. It was two against five.

"This won't be as easy as you think. We're in the middle of Sairaag. If I use the people here as hostages, you're powerless!" she declared with a growl, casually proposing war crimes like the third-rate villain she was. "And even if this puppet is just a poor copy, it still has incredible capacity. If I control it right, you're no match for us!"

"There is no 'us,'" said an unexpected voice.

"What...?" Eris gasped in a stunned whisper.

Zing! A blast of energy shot by "Rezo" pierced through her.



"Ah..." She stared down at the gaping hole in her stomach in disbelief, then at Rezo's face, then at herself again.

"Is it so unusual for a homunculus to acquire self-awareness? I suppose you would find it surprising... But you should know that it came to me during an experiment that you yourself attended."

"Ngh..." Eris moaned. Her knees trembled.

"With my capacity and self-awareness, I have no reason to be your plaything. Did you not find it strange that Vizea joined you so readily? Such beings only serve those with whom they've made a pact, or those who possess superior magical power. That one *did* appear to have a contract with Rezo, but... no demon would mistake us just because we have the same appearance and the same blood in our veins. No, he was serving *me*. And, of course, I could remove this silly thing any time I wanted to..."

There, "Rezo" reached for the control ruby on his own forehead, grabbed it unceremoniously between his porcelain white thumb and forefinger, and crushed it seemingly without effort.

"The information you provided was rather useful, so I decided to humor you for a time, but... Oh dear."

Eris fell limply toward the ground as if entirely depleted of strength, but Rezo grabbed her head tightly in his hand. We could hear a faint creaking sound, even from where we were standing. A small, weak cry drifted from Eris's mouth.

"Careful there... You almost collapsed, but my sad tale isn't over, I'm afraid. Have you realized yet what it is I've been trying to do? Indeed, it's all about revenge. I was created as a guinea pig for Rezo's attempts to grant himself sight. But the methods that restored my sight easily failed to do the same for him."

It was because of the strength of the seal that had been placed on his eyes, but Rezo didn't know that at the time. It didn't seem the "Rezo" standing before us now knew about it either. But I did, and it occurred to me... it was strange

that this “Rezo” kept his eyes closed too. He should have been able to see if what he was saying was true.

“Rezo never let it show, but his failure infuriated him, and he redirected that into virulent hatred for me. Why, after all, could he give sight so easily to a clone made from his own flesh and blood, while he himself remained sightless? Who wouldn’t be furious over such a thing? And he punished me for it. Rather than declaring my purpose fulfilled, he continued to use me for other ‘magical experiments.’

“And during one such ‘experiment’ that you yourself attended, my self-awareness awakened. Of course, I cannot say for certain that I am driven by a will entirely my own... But if I am, I believe it is only natural that I’m propelled by a loathing for Rezo for what he’s done to me.”

I didn’t know the details, but it sounded like the real Rezo had put copy boy here through the wringer. But Rezo was dead now, and if he just wanted revenge on Eris—on Vrumugun—there was no need to wreak such a convoluted plot...

“I came to dream of killing Rezo myself. I was certain I could do it. But before I had my chance, Rezo disappeared. Then,” the homunculus said with a sad sigh, “I came to find out he was dead. Can you understand it, Erisiel? The despair I felt, knowing I would never be able to defeat Rezo with my own hands?

“Yet as I wrestled with my grief, you entered my room and told me... that you wished to use me to *avenge* Rezo. So while you called his name and wept in my arms, a plan began to form in my head. Of course, I intended to kill you eventually as well for your role in those wretched experiments... Erisiel? Are you listening?”

After a brief silence, “Rezo” released Eris’s head as if tossing her aside. Her body fell lifelessly to the ground with a thud.

“She’s gone,” he declared plainly, his shoulders bobbing in a shrug.

"Then... this is over now, right?" Gourry asked, his expression pained. "Just rescind the bounty and we're done."

"Now, why should I do that?" Rezo asked with a quizzical look. "My revenge against Rezo is not yet complete."

Thought so...

"And it never will be. The real Rezo is dead," Gourry countered.

But "Rezo" simply smiled.

"Yes, I know. I do not expect to fight a dead man... But there is still a way I can prove myself his superior."

"By fighting and beating the people who killed him. Us."

"Precisely."

This was bad news, though. "Rezo" had had the chance to destroy us *and* Eris back when we'd faced him in the Miasma Forest. If he'd had his own free will all this time, he could have easily hit us before I got my Levitation spell off and blown us all away together.

The reason he hadn't was probably because he wanted to fight us at our best. I'd goofed the timing of my spells, and, moreover, I was preoccupied with protecting Lantz and Eris. Picking us off in a compromised state like that wouldn't have proven him superior. That was probably his holdup then, but it was open season now.

"Nonsense," Zelgadis muttered. "You expect us to play along with this?"

"I thought you might object, and I understand entirely. That is why I cannot lift your bounties. If you defeat me, however, there will be no one to pay it out, and thus you will be free," he said pointedly, striking his jangling staff against the ground firmly. "Now... shall we begin?"

Zelgadis moved first. He raised his broadsword high and charged. When he swung, "Rezo" simply slipped to the right, pivoting as his red cape fluttered in the air.

Clack. There was a dull sound, and the two men took their distance again. Rezo had used a spin-kick to deflect the

incoming blade, then continued with his momentum into a second kick aimed at Zelgadis's temple. He'd managed to dodge it, but...

"You've got to be kidding..." Zel breathed, his expression tight.

He inched closer to "Rezo," then struck in a flash the moment he dropped his guard. A high, clear sound rang out this time. Rezo blocked Zelgadis's strike with his staff, then spun it in his hand to catch Zelgadis in the stomach.

"Gwuh!"

The strike looked effortless, yet it sent Zel flying. "Rezo" leaving himself open had been a trap, it seemed.

Hang on... This guy might actually be a serious badass!

"I wish you'd come at me with everything you have," he pleaded almost abashedly.

"Can I request a duel, then?" Gourry asked, sheathing the Sword of Light and plucking a broadsword off the ground—probably from one of the fallen berserkers.

"I'd prefer not," the Red Priest's copy said politely, shaking his head.

"He wants you to use the Sword of Light, man!" I explained to the blinking, surprised Gourry.

"She is, of course, correct."

"Tch..." Gourry tutted in annoyance, then tossed aside the sword he'd just picked up.

"W-Wait a minute..." Zelgadis said as he got to his feet. "I'm not done yet. I couldn't live with myself if I backed down now."

"Go ahead, then. Either or both of you. All three, if you'd like."

"Shut up!" Zelgadis screamed as he charged in again.

But "Rezo" blocked every sword strike and spell Zel could throw at him with a single swing of his staff. This dude was just... incredible. He hadn't even taken the offensive yet. Even if we all came at him at once, even if he gave us a handicap... there was no way we were going to get the

better of him.

But at the same time, if I threw off my limiters and hit him with my big spells, Sairaag would once again be known as the City of the Dead.

And so...

"Mistress Lina," Sylphiel said quietly, apparently having moved over to me at some point. "Master Zelgadis mentioned to me... You have a spell that surpasses Dragon Slave, yes?"

My Giga Slave? C'mon, Zelgadis! Don't just go around blabbing about that!

Dragon Slave was considered to be the ultimate attack spell, for it called upon Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu, the Dark Lord who reigns over all chaos in our world. Naturally, as a primo genius sorcerer, I was one of a select few who could use it. Giga Slave was similar, but it instead called upon the power of the Lord of Nightmares, the dark lord over all dark lords, sovereign of time and the void of the stars. It was an extremely powerful spell, but also extremely risky. If I failed to control it properly, it would suck up all my life energy and —*poof!*—no more Lina.

"You mustn't use it," Sylphiel warned.

"H-Hey now... Don't act like I'm some kind of attack spell junkie who can't help herself! I'd never use a spell like that in the middle of a city! Even I know better—"

"No, that isn't what I mean," Sylphiel interrupted forcefully. "I beg you. *Never* use it again."

My eyes went wide at those words.

"Wh-What are you..."

"That spell... Do you know what will happen if you lose control of it?"

Do I know, she asks! Well, as far as I was aware, I was the only person who'd ever cast the dang thing... which meant nobody had ever *actually* lost control of it before. So, thinking about it that way, I couldn't say I knew for sure what would happen.

"I reckon I'll die."

"Much worse than that. If my prophecy is true, then... I think it might destroy the world."

Destroy... the world? I was dumbstruck.

"Surely you know of a shrine maiden's oracle ability, don't you?"

I nodded. It was the ability to commune with gods—or beings roughly on that level—and learn things beyond normal human knowledge. Which, yeah, *sounds* like a really useful ability, but in truth, there was no control over how it worked. Not even the shrine maiden herself had any idea when, where, or how they might receive their divine inspirations.

Received oracles didn't even necessarily relate to whatever problem you were currently grappling with, see. For an extreme example, let's say you're a shrine maiden stressed out about a plot that might destroy your kingdom. You can pray all you want and get nothing, only to find your divine being of choice suddenly whispering to you while you're sitting on the can about the price of radishes in ten years' time. (Like I said, that's extreme, but you get my point.)

Even seemingly useless prophecies, however, would always come true. So if Sylphiel said the world was going to be destroyed, then it would be.

"That spell creates a portal that allows the void to enter our world and gives it the power to annihilate most things. And if unleashed, the void could incarnate here using the caster—you—as a nexus. I know it sounds strange to talk about void incarnate... but it would draw everything into it."

Draw everything into it? She said it like it was nothing... but that was... yeah, that was pretty damn serious. The gravity of it all kept me silent.

Still, there was no point in stressing over it in the moment. I wasn't going to cast Giga Slave here and now either way.

"Don't worry. I won't use it."

After giving her that shallow promise (a Lina specialty!), I turned my attention back to the ongoing fight between Zel and "Rezo." Zelgadis's shoulders were heaving as he sized up his opponent, who stood before him without a hair out of place. Zelgadis wasn't weak, mind you. Not by any means. "Rezo" was just that strong.

"Dammit!" Zelgadis shouted, tossing his sword aside to begin a chant.

Hang on! That spell...

"Yes, good... It wouldn't be right if you didn't try that," Rezo whispered gleefully.

Are you guys crazy?!

Vrave Howl was a spell that turned a patch of ground into a boiling lava flow. We were behind Zelgadis and it was a directed attack, so it wasn't like he would hit us with it, but it would do serious damage to the stretch of Sairaag behind "Rezo." Even if it didn't raze the city outright, we'd still have a massive fire on our hands.

"Have you lost your mind, Zel?!" I cried. "Don't you know what that'll do to the city?!"

My plea snapped Zel to his senses, and he quickly backed off. "Rezo," however, seemed disappointed at this development.

"Hmm, how troublesome... I really need you to hit me with everything you have, or there'll be no point to defeating you at all."

It was a bold statement, but it wasn't just big talk. His capacity seemed to be even greater than mine, and his combat skills were at least on par with Gourry's.

"I know... Let's try this." With an expression like a child who'd just hit upon a grand idea, "Rezo" struck his staff against the ground.

"ΞΗΠΩ..."

A strange spell that no normal person could pronounce and that I only barely recognized as words slipped his lips.

The next instant...

With a hard, dry sound, thin walls of shining magic rose to encase the five of us and “Rezo.”

“Wh-What is he doing?!” Lantz panicked.

“Simply undoing their fetters. You and Mistress Sylphiel there will be the witnesses to our true battle.”

N-No way! He can't be...

“...ཐུག་...”

More strange words drifted by on the wind.

“Please! Stop!” I cried.

But as I called to him, “Rezo” completed his spell.

“H!”

He raised his staff aloft, and then... everything outside of his barrier was engulfed in bright light. A soft crack rang out from the Bless Blade in Lantz's hands.

“What the...”

“What?! What just happened?!”

“What’s going on?!”

Everyone else was shouting, but amidst all the confusion, “Rezo” and I just silently glared at each other. We were the only two who knew what he’d just done. In an instant, he’d rendered Sairaag worthy of its old namesake... the City of the Dead.

It was Sylphiel who screamed first when the light faded and we could see around us again. The energy wave left from the attack was still wreaking havoc on the city. The barrier cut off all sound from the outside, but we could see the destruction roiling.

Rocks the size of a person's torso blew around like bits of paper, slamming into other rocks and bursting apart. I couldn't see far through all the dust and debris, but even the lingering energy in the spell's tail end spoke of destructive power that exceeded a Dragon Slave. Which meant that Sairaag... That first wave of light must have wiped it off the map.

“Impossible...” Zelgadis whispered hoarsely.

Sylphiel fainted, and Lantz rushed to catch her.

As the dust outside the barrier began to settle, the exact sight I feared came into view: a barren wasteland.

Just minutes ago, Sairaag had been a vibrant city filled with smiling, happy people going about their lives. Now it was gone as if it had never been there at all. Only one thing remained: Flagoon. Stripped of its thick covering of leaves and branches, it now looked more like a massive post driven into the desolate landscape than a tree. Yet, somehow, it had survived the blast.

"That was perhaps excessive... and that did tire me a bit... but now you can fight me without reservation," the copy of the Red Priest said calmly.

"Do you even realize... what you just did?" I hissed.

In response, he flashed a warm smile.

"But of course... I simply don't care. My only concern is banishing the specter of Rezo the Red Priest from my mind. And I will do so by defeating you as you fight me with everything you have."

"In that case," I said, pointing straight at him, "I'll take you out just like you want—with everything I have!"

There, I clasped my fingers together in front of my chest and began a dark incantation.

"A Dragon Slave!" Rezo exclaimed joyously before more strange words dripped from his lips.

He was probably trying to blow us away before I could finish my spell... But I wasn't gonna let that happen!

Thou who art darker than twilight

Thou who art redder than lifeblood

I swear in thy exalted name

Obscured, deep in the flow of time

And make this pledge to darkness here:

So all those in equal measure—

Fools that they are to block our path—

Shall face destruction unconstrained

Grant me power, and unleash thine!

My chant, spoken in chaos words, distorted the laws of cause and effect. It would be unleashed with one final capstone—a word of power—using my gestures and my spirit as an intermediary.

Here goes!

“Dragon Slave!”

“𐌹𐌺𐌰!”

We completed our spells simultaneously.

Crap! We’re gonna kill each other!

But just as I thought so... a curious red mist appeared in the area around Rezo where the explosion from my Dragon Slave should have occurred. It drifted around Rezo for a moment, then began to fade... And that was that.

“Rezo” then explained in a quiet voice, “Killing each other would render this all pointless... so I chose to block your Dragon Slave instead.”

I couldn’t even move. This was absurd! That spell could take out a reasonably high-level demon. For any mere human, even the greatest of sorcerers, there should have been no way to block it.

And yet, with ease, he’d...

“Don’t look so surprised,” the copy of the Red Priest said calmly. “Dragon Slave calls on the power of Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu. I merely invoked the same power to block it. It’s a simple equation,” he said as casually as if he were sharing an easy late-night snack recipe.

It made sense in theory, but... Dragon Slave basically demanded your entire magic capacity. That meant even if two casters called upon the Dark Lord, the defending caster still had to have the greater power.

“Now...” he said, unhurriedly readying his staff.

“𐌹𐌺!”

As he chanted, however, he suddenly swept his staff to the right. *Zzzing!* There was a burst of movement. I don’t know when he’d done it but Gourry had gotten around behind “Rezo” and into striking range. But “Rezo” had

blocked the Sword of Light with his magic-infused staff.

"You're next, are you?!" the Red Priest's copy asked, his face tensing.

Then there was a flicker of silver light and a sword pierced through his red cape... But "Rezo" had already cast his mantle aside and leaped to safety some distance away, closer to Flagoon.

"I'll be joining in too, if you don't mind," Zelgadis, the attacker, said with a grin.

Who comes at someone from behind? That's what baddies do! Then again, when your opponent can wave off a Dragon Slave, fighting honorably probably isn't the wisest strategy...

"Zelgadis!" Gourry shouted in a scolding tone.

"Master Gourry... I think you may have the wrong idea," Zel said, his gaze fixed on the copy of the Red Priest. "We can't beat this guy in a fair fight one-on-one. We don't stand a chance."

"But..."

"By all means, come at me together," the man in red invited. "That will make things more interesting for me as well. What about you? Care to join in too?"

I immediately shook my head. No one else is gonna say it, so I will. I may be a crackerjack with a sword—I could probably even take a dozen novice swordsmen at once—but I'm no Gourry or Zelgadis! If I threw in with those two in a swordfight, I'd just hold them back. Granted, even casting spells from the sideline like a good little sorcerer, I might still end up hitting one of them if I wasn't careful.

"Nah. I'd rather focus on fighting smart."

"As you wish. In that case..." He turned to face the other two again.

Of course, that didn't mean I was just gonna sit back and watch the battle. I was already working on various plans in my head. Not that anything was really jumping out at me...

If this guy could wave off a Dragon Slave, the only thing

that stood a chance of beating him was my Giga Slave. “Rezo” probably didn’t even know such a spell existed. Even if he tried to block it the same way again, it should be more than enough to beat him.

Still, Sylphiel had begged me not to use it earlier... And, yeah, sure, she was passed out right now and would be none the wiser if I slipped. But a lecture from a shrine maiden wasn’t really what I was afraid of at the moment.

As I thought things over, the fight continued. Rezo blocked Gourry’s strike, deflected Zelgadis’s spell, and leaped backward.

“!” he howled.

Hraaah! A strange scream rang through the air as if resonating with his voice. “Rezo” had finally gone on the attack. He was instantly wreathed by a dozen orbs of light, each about the size of my fist.

A chill ran up my spine. Was this... a Blast Bomb?!

As far as I knew, there was only one sorcerer in history who could use this spell: the ancient sage Lei Magnus, who was also the progenitor of Dragon Slave. I’d spent some time studying this spell too, but it had proven beyond me. I’d managed to get as far as launching a bunch of small balls of flame that exploded on impact, but the power I could muster with them was trivial. According to legend, each orb should have been several times more destructive than your standard Fireball.

“Not good! Run!” I shouted just as “Rezo” unleashed his orbs.

The boys scrambled back—but not fast enough! There were multiple flashes as the balls of light exploded. The crimson flames consumed them both.

I let out a voiceless scream. That was a direct hit... I could feel my knees trembling.

Gourry... Zelgadis...

Before long, the smoke and flame subsided, and... There they both were, looking shocked but unharmed.

“Hmm...”

Unamused, “Rezo” turned his gaze to me. No, past me!

“I don’t have the power to kill you... but I can do this much,” someone whispered.

I turned to see who it was, and...

“Sylphiel!”

She’d recovered from her swoon and cast a defensive spell on the boys before they were hit. It must have been a powerful one, too. Her shoulders were heaving from effort.

“Sir Gourry! Master Zelgadis! Avenge Sairaag... and my father! Now, before he breaks through the barrier!”

“Got it!”

“Right!”

The boys, finally grasping the situation, charged “Rezo” at once.

Zelgadis got within arm’s reach and cast a spell, which the Red Priest diverted with a swipe of his magic-infused left hand. The next instant, Gourry’s Sword of Light descended on him and he blocked it with his staff. Zel made a play with his broadsword and “Rezo” lithely twisted to avoid it. He then deflected Gourry’s next attack while executing a perfect spin-kick that nailed Zelgadis’s hand and knocked his sword out of it.

Gourry took the opportunity to swing, but “Rezo” once again caught the Sword of Light with his staff. Even unarmed, however, Zelgadis wouldn’t relent! He lunged for “Rezo,” and the moment their silhouettes crossed...

“Ngh!”

I heard a small groan as I saw a flash and then Zelgadis went flying. But...

“Heh...”

Zel was smirking as he picked himself up. I don’t know where he’d hidden it, but he held a shortsword in his hand that was now stained red.

“Rezo,” bleeding from his side, scowled at him viciously when...

Gourry's right foot met his chin. The Red Priest did a somersault and hit the ground flat, with Gourry right on top of him. He straddled his prone opponent, one foot on each of the priest's arms and the Sword of Light held aloft. "Rezo" was now completely subject to his mercy. He couldn't use his hands, and even if he tried to throw Gourry off, the Sword of Light would still fall and slay him.

It looked like the fight was over... and I hadn't lifted a finger.

"Finish him, Gourry!" Zelgadis screamed.

But the man didn't listen.

"Do you swear to rescind the bounty on us and never come after us again?" Gourry demanded, holding his position.

"Excuse me! Master Gourry!" Zelgadis shouted critically.

"You're really strong... Or, you were. But I don't like fighting helpless men, so I don't want to kill you if I can help it."

"Naive fool..." Zel spat.

"I..." Rezo said, still pinned. Gourry was blocking my view, so I couldn't see the guy's expression. "I am even stronger than you think..."

Wait, was there an echo in his voice? Just as I was wondering that...

Gourry leaped back screaming. He jumped as far as he could and landed—no, collapsed—awkwardly. Spatters of red stained the ground around him. I could see two vertical cuts stretching from his shoulders to his thighs.

What in the world...?

"Yes, behold..." the priest said as his body began to emit a quavering darkness.

"What?!" Zelgadis nearly shrieked.

"Behold what Rezo the Red Priest did to me..."

Lantz, who was still just watching, let out a scream, while Sylphiel gasped.

I looked. At Rezo's face—his true face. His eyes, closed all

this time, were finally open.

I shouldn't even say "eyes"... for inside his open sockets were rows of small white ridges lining a crimson darkness from which scarlet whips grew. Those must have been what slashed Gourry. It took me a minute to realize that they were tongues. So, what should have been eyes were actually two cavities full of small teeth, which were now drawn up in the shape of smiles.

To give him sight—I guess—a large, lone blue eye sat vertically in the center of his forehead, now visible with his hood removed.



"Yes, the Red Priest Rezo and the sorcerer Vrumugun... This is what they did to me..."

"They fused my body with a demon..."

"And through that experiment, I became self-aware... How ironic..."

His three mouths all spoke in rotation.

"Did my fusion with a demon awaken my sentience?"

"Or is my will simply that of the demon?"

"I fear even I don't know..."

The blind Red Priest, enraged at his homunculus who'd found the light so effortlessly, had fused the non-sentient copy with a demon. Out of anger. Out of spite. Or perhaps even out of twisted amusement. That explained why this copy-Rezo could cast such incredible spells. Everything he'd done was easily within the capacity of the demon inside him.

I was reminded of what Sylphiel had said about Rezo's arrival accelerating Flagoon's growth. Now that I thought about it, it would take something major to make the tree grow so quickly... And, as creatures of darkness, demons were like infinite wellsprings of hatred. The miasma they produced was just the kind of thing the tree ate up.

But in that case...

I backed up slowly to stand next to Sylphiel.

"Sylphiel," I whispered to her. "I'm gonna blow this guy away... to avenge your city, and your father."

"Now... make way for the real star of the show," I said as I walked forward. "Lantz, look after Gourry. Those wounds shouldn't be fatal, so don't worry too much."

I then readied the Bless Blade, which I'd borrowed from Lantz. The damage to the tree must have taken a toll on it, as visible hairline cracks now ran through the silver sword. I cast a glance back at Flagoon, visible to my left.

Hang in there, Gourry. I'll finish this soon.

"This will be a battle of magic, no?" Rezo smiled quietly. "I

should warn you, it won't be easy... In exchange for the burden of this disgusting body, I have acquired the magical capacity and techniques of a demon."

"Hey, we won't know until we try it, will we? Let's do this, Zelgadis."

"Right," he said as he tossed his bloodied shortsword aside. Now that we knew Rezo was fused with a demon, mundane weapons were worthless.

"Lina!" Gourry called through a cough, holding out the Sword of Light. "Don't you... need this?"

"Give it to Zelgadis," I said, holding the Bless Blade up in a battle-ready posture. "I'm using this."

"Got it," Gourry responded with a bright smile as he tossed the sword to Zel.

"Are all your preparations complete, then?" Rezo asked. Zel and I both nodded resolutely.

"ㄗ!"

Rezo's three mouths each chanted different verses simultaneously. This explained how he'd been casting spells in an inhuman tongue. Composite incantations, backed by the magic capacity of a demon...

We all leaped up. In that instant, blue plasma raced through the ground. If we hadn't been airborne, it would have hit us for sure. The moment we landed, I finished my chant.

"Goz Vu Row!"

Black shadows raced along the ground toward Rezo. If they hit him, they would damage his astral form directly. Not even *he* could shrug that off.

"Futile!"

He brandished his staff again, ready to banish the shadows like he did before. But I wasn't going to let him have it that easy!

I snapped my fingers and swung my left hand widely. The shadows changed trajectory accordingly under my control. Normally Goz Vu Row was a straightforward spell that moved

in a line... but if you really understood the incantation, you could make a few alterations for effects like this.

“What?!” Rezo jumped back in a panic. The shadows continued to home in on him.

“*Ō!*”

He incanted his spell and traced a wide arc on the ground with the tip of his staff. The instant the shadows touched it—*Fshhh!*—they vanished into thin air.

And while that was all happening, Zelgadis threw himself at Rezo. The Sword of Light streaked toward him, and he dodged it, looking unthreatened. But then...

The blade on the Sword of Light shot out of its handle straight toward Rezo! Zelgadis then began charging as a new blade formed in its place. His plan was to cut the Red Priest down while he was knocking aside the first blade with his staff!

“Tch!”

But Rezo swiped the approaching magical blade away with his hand, then swung his staff down at Zel! *Whunk!* Zelgadis took the blow head-on and was sent flying.

I’d nearly crept around Rezo and finished an incantation at this point, but he finally noticed me and quickly began to chant a counterspell.

I got mine off first: “Dynast Blas!”

Lightning crashed into the five points of a pentagram—symbolizing the purging of evil—that had formed around Rezo. Electricity from every angle assaulted him all at once.

He began chanting and raised his staff, and when he did... *Shing!* It audibly broke into pieces.

It probably had some kind of magic of its own, but my attack spell along with Rezo’s defensive spell together simply put too much strain on it. And once it was done for, lightning struck Rezo head-on!

“Gwaaaah!” the three mouths howled at once.

Then the lightning circle burst. Rezo had broken through my spell with sheer spiritual power.

“Not bad!”

Dodging a swift blow from the recovered Zel, he leaped back—in the direction of Flagoon—and began a new chant.

We didn’t have any idea what spell it was, so our only safe option was to evade. But would this one race along the ground again, or would it come from the air? If we chose the wrong move, we were toast.

Ugh! I decided to stay on the ground, resigning myself to the worst. Not knowing anything about this Rezo’s personality, I didn’t have a good read on him. I just had to go with my gut.

“!”

The Red Priest completed his spell and raised both hands high into the air. His body glowed with a bright white light.

I didn’t even have time to shout. Zel and I were both consumed by the light he conjured. And when it faded... I was down on one knee. Zelgadis was in a similar position. Gourry and Lantz were looking at us worriedly, so I raised a hand to show them I was okay. I couldn’t see any sign of Sylphiel. She must have moved while we were fighting. Now, the question was if we could finish this...

I stood up shakily, lifting the Bless Blade at Rezo. Flagoon was visible just over his shoulder.

“You okay, Zel?” I asked.

“I think so... but he really is...” he replied, sounding exhausted from the spell.

It appeared to be some extreme version of Elemekia Lance, a spell that targeted an opponent’s spirit directly. And when I say it was extreme, I don’t mean its power, but its breadth. You normally fired it like a spear, but Rezo’s was like a wave of light. That diluted the effect somewhat, so he’d need more than the one hit to incapacitate us... but he’d still dealt a serious blow to our magical power. I wouldn’t be using any more big spells this fight.

Zelgadis was in the same boat, as indicated by the Sword of Light in his hand. The weapon, whose brilliant blade

reflected its user's will, was much shorter now than it had been before.

"Anyway, let's go!" I said, charging off. Left with no other choice, Zelgadis ran with me.

I knew if I tried any petty tricks, Rezo would just brush them aside. We could potentially slay him with the Sword of Light and the Bless Blade, but Rezo had also proved he could best us both in combat.

Rushing past the Red Priest on either side, we swung our swords simultaneously. Rezo dodged them both with ease and directed a spin-kick at Zelgadis. The golem boy just dodged it, and we met back up at the base of the now-bare Flagoon.

"What exactly are you planning? Well, knowing you, you might not have a plan at all..." he whispered quietly.

"On my signal, hit him with all the Fireballs you can muster, then dive to the side."

"All right," he agreed without any further questions.

"Okay... Let's go!"

I took off running again. If we could finish Rezo here and now...

"It's time to end this!" he declared, holding both hands up.

"Zel!"

Right on cue, he sent multiple balls of light barreling toward Rezo.

"Hahh!"

With a swing of his left hand, the Red Priest detonated them all midair. He'd probably emitted a field of pure magic to make the Fireballs explode prematurely. Flashes of light and smoke obscured the area. It was obviously a distraction.

"That won't work!" Rezo cried.

He unleashed the magic stored up in his right hand in the direction I'd been standing moments ago, then leaped back far. He must have realized that he hadn't hit anything, or maybe he sensed my presence, because...

He turned to look behind him. But it was too late! I was already in position.

I'd wreathed the Bless Blade in wind, then let it fly. This effectively turned it into a javelin, which pierced through Rezo's heart!

"Guh!"

The sword embedded itself in the priest up to its hilt, driving him back and spearing him against Flagoon.

While he was occupied with the exploding Fireballs, I'd used a Lei Wing to fly over the Red Priest's head and get around behind him. Gotcha!

"It's not over yet!" Zelgadis cried.

"I will not be ended!" Rezo roared, grasping the sword impaling him.

His demonic nature meant that he didn't feel any pain from the Bless Blade if it wasn't in human hands. But...

"Sylphiel!" I called out.

She'd been waiting behind Flagoon this entire time, and it was finally her turn to work her magic.

Tha-thump! Flagoon pulsed, and Rezo let out a scream that echoed through the wasteland that was now Sairaag. On my signal, Sylphiel had cast a spell on Flagoon. A healing spell.

I've talked about this before, but Recovery stimulates the natural vitality of its recipient to max out their regenerative powers. The cells of Flagoon were thus jump-started one by one, and its stripped bark, branches, and leaves all got to work restoring themselves. This process required an enormous source of energy, mind you. But, fortunately, it had a nearly endless supply of miasma close by.

In other words... Rezo.

Flagoon was now regrowing quickly. The bark on its trunk returned before our eyes and green buds began to sprout across its breadth. In a flash, the buds turned to leaves and then branches, which grew long and strong...

Rezo's struggling slowed gradually. The miasma that

powered his demonic vitality was being drained away from him, consumed by the tree. All that left him was his human vitality. And with that sword through his chest...

Blugh. He spat out a gob of red blood.

"H-How..." he whispered as he writhed. "How... did I... lose? Why could I not... surpass... Rezo?"

"You don't know?" I asked.

The priest was silent for a time.

"...I was... fixated on him alone. That's why... I could never surpass him..."

"That's right."

The green leaves of Flagoon rustled in the wind. Rezo coughed up another gob of blood.

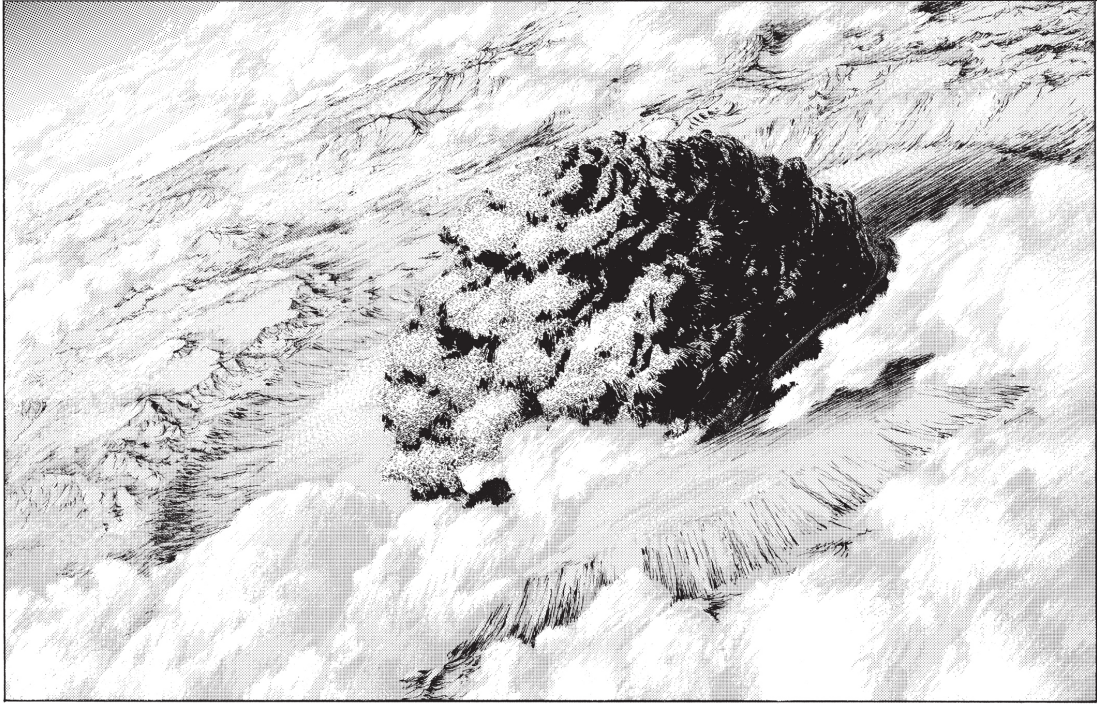
"What name do you want on your gravestone?" Zelgadis asked.

"I don't... need one..." he responded with a slight smile.

"Let this tree... mark my grave..."

And with that, he let out one final sigh.

The green leaves continued to rustle in the wind.



Epilogue

"Security is pretty tight around here..." I said as I took a bite of mutton. We were in an inn close to the capital of the Holy Land of Saillune (not that I know what's holy about it), Saillune City. "Must really be some trouble going down in these parts, huh?"

"But if everything goes as planned, we should reach the city by tomorrow," Gourry said, not forgetting to take a bite out of his chicken.

"Thank you for everything," Sylphiel popped in with a sudden show of formality. "I fear I've caused you a great deal of trouble on the way, but thank you for escorting me, Sir Gourry... Oh, and you too, Mistress Lina."

Hey!

"Well, you've done a lot for us too," Gourry replied with a goofy laugh.

He was right about that.

There was everything that went down in Sairaag, and afterward... Sylphiel was the most traumatized out of everyone, yet she'd worked tirelessly for us without a single complaint.

She'd gone to the closest neighboring city, handled all the annoying paperwork, and gotten the bounty lifted off our heads. Poor girl was homeless now too, so after that, she decided to head to Saillune City to stay with relatives. Word on the street was that things were a little dangerous in the area as of late, however, which was why she'd asked us to escort her.

If I'm being totally honest, I didn't want to take the job. I'd met the heir to the throne of Saillune (don't you dare call him a prince), and I wasn't exactly a fan. But that wasn't a

valid reason to turn Sylphiel down, so here we were.

Along the way, Lantz had decided that hanging around with us was “hazardous to his health” and went off to adventure on his own. Zलगadis had disappeared too, saying he was going to look for a way to become human again. I invited him to tag along anyway, suggesting he might find something in Saillune, the city of white magic, but he just silently shook his head. Apparently that was the first place he’d tried, and he’d come up empty.

I hoped they were both doing well.

Every time I thought back to the incident in Sairaag, the scene played over in my mind. Flagoon swaying in the breeze in the middle of the wasteland. And sleeping beneath it, a nameless man birthed by Rezo the Red Priest, cursed with a wretched fate... and only a sword to mark his grave...

Afterword

Hello again! It's me, L, back with the author's full permission to handle this afterword! What's that, you ask? What's that concrete lump in the closet? How should I know? It's none of my business! I'm sure the author could tell you all about it, but more's the pity, he's not here right now!

Now, on to bigger matters! Those of you starting with these new editions, and even those of you who read them back in the day, you may have questions. There's a lot that goes unexplained in these *Slayers* novels, isn't there? For example, all that "my big sister back home" stuff!

So for this afterword, when I was interrogating the author—I mean, while we were having a nice chat on a fashionable cafe terrace—I asked if he could explain it. Unfortunately, he said it's all for flavor, not foreshadowing.

You see, back when the author was going to design school, during illustration class, he heard his teacher comment on a drawing of a party done by a classmate, "The whole group fits so perfectly on-screen, it's hard to believe there are people off-screen." That really stuck with him for some reason. To phrase it differently, if everything that appears in the story is fully explained, it makes the whole world feel smaller.

Unlike TV, manga, and other forms of entertainment, novels have to be expressed in words and the most powerful weapon is always the reader's imagination! So things like Lina's big sister back home, Gourry's grandmother, and Gourry's first adventure in Sairaag are just there to stimulate the reader's imagination. The author might not even know the whole story!

From what I can tell, that's a very artsy-fartsy way of him

saying he doesn't want to be bothered to answer questions in-story. Some of what isn't explored are clearly just things he never gave any thought, but there are other things that have been designed and are just never revealed. Like Lina's sister. There's actually a big afterword in the short story collection that talks about her.

On the other hand, there are also certain things that don't get explored simply because it's a first-person narrative. For instance, there's the assassin Zuma who will appear in a later volume. The author had a backstory in mind for him, but because the novels are told from Lina's point of view, it seemed unrealistic for him to start talking about it out of nowhere. Of course, if you ask me, it's the author's fault for not creating a situation where Zuma *would* talk about his backstory!

Speaking of which, *Slayers* is getting another TV adaptation this year [2008], and Zuma's going to be in it. When the author realized that, he gave the staff some material about the character that never made it into the novels, so you might learn more about him if you watch the anime.

Of course, there are lots of things the author just never got around to talking about, but there seem to be even more he never got around to even *thinking* about! Like what happened to Gourry in Sairaag! He said he hasn't given it one iota of thought. So if you're hoping for an episode about that, you'll likely be disappointed. Then again, given the author's wishy-washy nature, I can't say it'll never happen.

Rather than drawing up outlines and writing according to plan, he's the type to figure out what happens as he goes. Some writers say stories just come to them, but for this silly author, it's more like he's trying to put together puzzle pieces he's scattered around on the floor. Really, he's less like a storyteller and more like a puzzler. To the author, a story isn't a stroke of inspiration, but rather something that he constructs. In another series, it's possible he even added

a cool bad guy and then started worrying, like, “Wow! What a strong enemy! That’s great, but how do we beat him?”

He might actually just be stupid, you see.

When I think about it that way, it’s kind of a miracle you *Slayers* readers have supported him this long... Maybe it’s really because of my wonderful afterwords! Though, given the author’s personality, it’s possible he might write stories about such incidents as he thinks of them.

Anyway, up through volume 3 here, he’s pretty much been telling stories as he gets ideas. But starting with volume 4, our heroes will be swept up in a grander epic!

Next up is *Slayers, volume 4: The Battle of Saillune*! It’s a story about Lina and friends heading for the capital of Saillune, Saillune City! Which is kind of like sightseeing in Tokyo, if you know what I mean! Like going to Tokyo

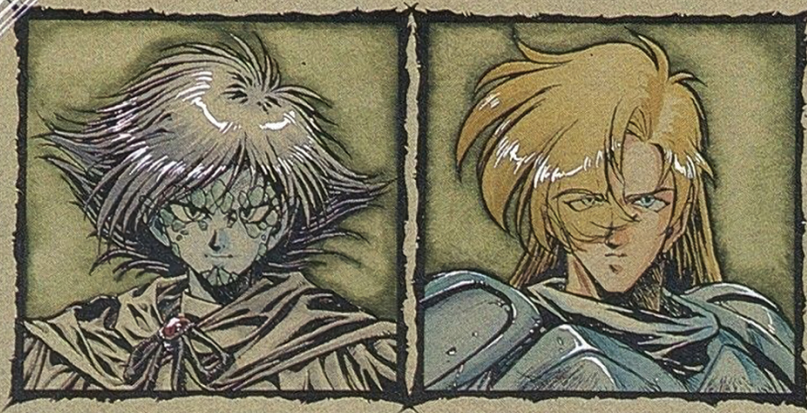
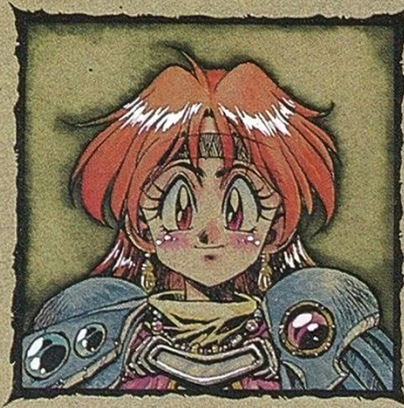
*****land and saying something overdone like, “But it’s not *technically* in Tokyo.” Or whining about how you’d rather go to the Ra*nbow Br*dge. Or finding a famous celebrity while you’re walking around and getting a selfie with them.

That last one would’ve been fun too, but too bad! Too freakin’ bad!

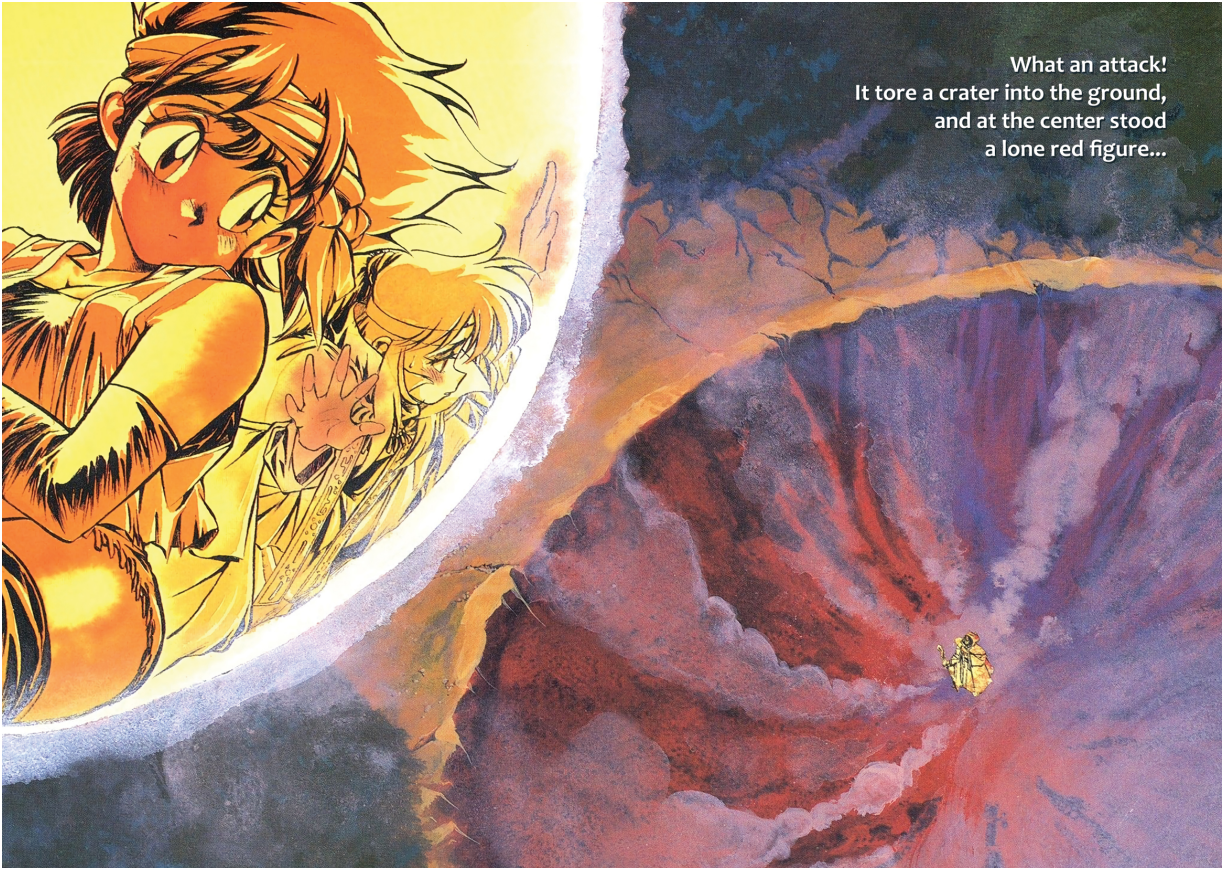
Anyway, that’s the kind of story it is! So, that’s *Slayers*! See you again in the next volume!

Afterword: Over.

WANTED!



Slayers 3
THE GHOSTS OF SAIRAAG



What an attack!
It tore a crater into the ground,
and at the center stood
a lone red figure...

I felt a
hot sensation
in my abdomen.
What...
What the...?!





Bonus Translator/Editor Chat!

[Meg/ED]

Well, Liz, I think we left off last time talking about demons and Lantz—both of which are pretty major players in this volume! But I have a bit of a confession to make, and I'm honestly surprised it hasn't come up before now...

Sometimes while I'm working on *Slayers*, I literally hear Lina's voice as Hayashibara Megumi in my head.

[Liz/TL]

The legend! Yeah, I definitely do that with Midorikawa Hikaru and Zelgadis, if I'm ever feeling unsure how he should sound.

[Meg/ED]

I have to admit that I didn't remember Zelgadis was Midorikawa Hikaru! I think that was lost on me the first time I watched the series, but when I came back to it years later, I was like, "Wait, is that... Yeah, it totally is!" That was a fun surprise.

[Liz/TL]

The first two anime series I got really into were *Slayers* and *Fushigi Yugi*, so realizing that Tamahome and Zelgadis were the same person was kind of a mind blown moment for li'l teenage me. Ditto Hotohori and Rezo. That took me down the rabbit hole of seiyuu obsession, which I never fully climbed out of.

[Meg/ED]

Hard same. Speaking of, I had a magical little moment

working on this volume. I believe I left a note on an initial draft asking if copy-Rezo talks with the same sort of polite-yet-intimidating inflection that Rezo did. You replied something to the effect of, “Yup, still Koyasu-ing it up.” And I knew *exactly what you meant*.

[Liz/TL]

It’s true! The Koyasu-ness is important.

The voice actors in *Slayers* are so iconic. I recall there being a bunch of image songs and such, which I listened to (and sang along with!) pretty much constantly. And having that core group of actors—with Matsumoto Yasunori and Suzuki Masami, of course—really reinforces the idea of this “core four” cast of characters in the series, even though... well, it’s not that way in the novels, is it?

[Meg/ED]

Oh my gosh, the music... But, yeah, some of the fun of the *Slayers* novels is our semi-rotating cast of characters. It’s been a whole volume since we’ve seen Zelgadis, and we won’t even meet Amelia until next time. [We’ll also pick up you-know-who in volume 5, who just so happens to be voiced by *the* Ishida Akira!]

[Liz/TL]

Shh! That’s a secret. But yeah, we’re all excited for Amelia in volume 4, so who can blame the anime for introducing her early? Sadly, as in volume 2, that doesn’t leave a whole lot of room for Lantz.

[Meg/ED]

Lantz is an interesting character for me, partly because he gets scrubbed from the anime entirely even though he has a few big moments in this arc.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, you can understand why they'd remove him, from the perspective of conservation of characters and themes. They wanted to focus on the core four and craft a season-long arc around their main villain, Rezo. But it's kind of a shame, because I really like the story Lantz gets. It's like this group of the world's biggest badasses being forced by circumstance to put their faith in this completely unremarkable guy, and hey, he actually rises to the occasion.

[Meg/ED]

It's really heartening!

I also think he and Eris play off of each other well, but her role is notably different in the anime considering she ditches the whole "inept bounty hunter" gag and rolls onscreen a villain from frame one.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, that was VERY different from how I remembered it... to the degree that when I got to her appearance in the novel, I thought maybe they'd actually changed the character completely for the anime (since Talim and Daymia had a pretty big reworking), and that she wasn't going to be a villain at all. I was, um... very wrong about that! But at the same time, it meant I got the proper mystery experience on my read-through, which was nice.

[Meg/ED]

It's kind of fun to be led along and watch Lina sleuth her out on the sly. But while Eris's main concern is vengeance in both the novel and the anime, her exact motivations and machinations differ.

In the books, copy-Rezo spells out for us in no uncertain terms that he was created by Rezo for experimentation, whereas the anime strongly implies (if not states outright) that Eris created copy-Rezo.

Moreover, that she tried repeatedly to make a perfect copy of Rezo after his death, which draws an interesting (and perhaps unintentional) parallel between Eris/Rezo and Halciform/Rubia.

[Liz/TL]

Wow, I never even thought about that. I wonder if that was their way of subtly folding in the content of volume 2.

[Meg/ED]

It does make me curious. The story ultimately unfolds much the same way in the end, but I can't help chewing over those nuances.

[Liz/TL]

And Erisiel Vrumugun isn't a thing in the anime at all, as I recall. In fact, it's implied that the head Vrumugun is a guy who looks just like the other Vrumuguns.

[Meg/ED]

That's right; she never gets that name drop. Vrumugun pops up a few times (similar to his antics in the novel), but ends up disappearing without much fanfare. There's also an anime-only bounty hunter character named Zangulus. I initially thought he was supposed to be a stand-in for Lantz, but he behaves much more like Rod—another possible nod to volume 2.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, though Zangulus has a happier end in *NEXT*, and the "real" Vrumugun shows up in an Easter egg. It's a good time!

[Meg/ED]

That's a great tie-in!

[Liz/TL]

Our other “side character” this novel is Sylphiel, who despite appearing in the opening theme for the series from episode 1, doesn’t actually show up until episode... 18? I remember being very put out as a young’un, wondering when the pretty lady was gonna show up (sorry Lina). Of course if you were coming to the show from the novels, that would’ve been more like a promise that, “Yes, we’re getting to Sylphiel, don’t worry!”

[Meg/ED]

Yeah, sadly, I think Sylphiel’s role is a little diminished in the anime since she doesn’t get to show up and save the day with Zelgadis or squirrel the party away in a tree for safekeeping (pretty literally).

The abject horror of her witnessing the destruction of Sairaag is a little glossed over as well, but I can understand that since the anime tends to shy away from “abject horrors” in general.

[Liz/TL]

And when Lina almost dies it’s because she’s protecting Sylphiel, rather than because she got blindsided, which adds to a feeling that she gets the short end of the stick. Really, it’s interesting how this segment of the story is so similar in the broad strokes and tone, but all these little changes result in a very different experience.

[Meg/ED]

Too true. The anime also tosses a couple of really important plot points into the final episodes of the first season that I’d really love to talk about, but alas, those are going to have to wait until volume 5 for us.

[Liz/TL]

Yep, and we’ll be getting our “core four” reunited then!

[Meg/ED]

After a quick stop in Saillune where there won't be any trouble at all, right?

[Liz/TL]

Not at all. A peaceful place, I hear. A bastion of white magic and order.

[Meg/ED]

It's time for some JUSTICE and PEACE, all right.

[Liz/TL]

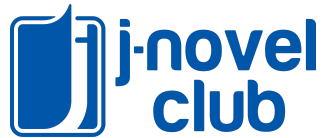
And not a single interdimensional monster!

[Meg/ED]

Oh, and the soup's to die for!

[Liz/TL]

The chicken, too! Ah, but we'll leave that for next time. See you then!



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Slayers: Volume 3
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